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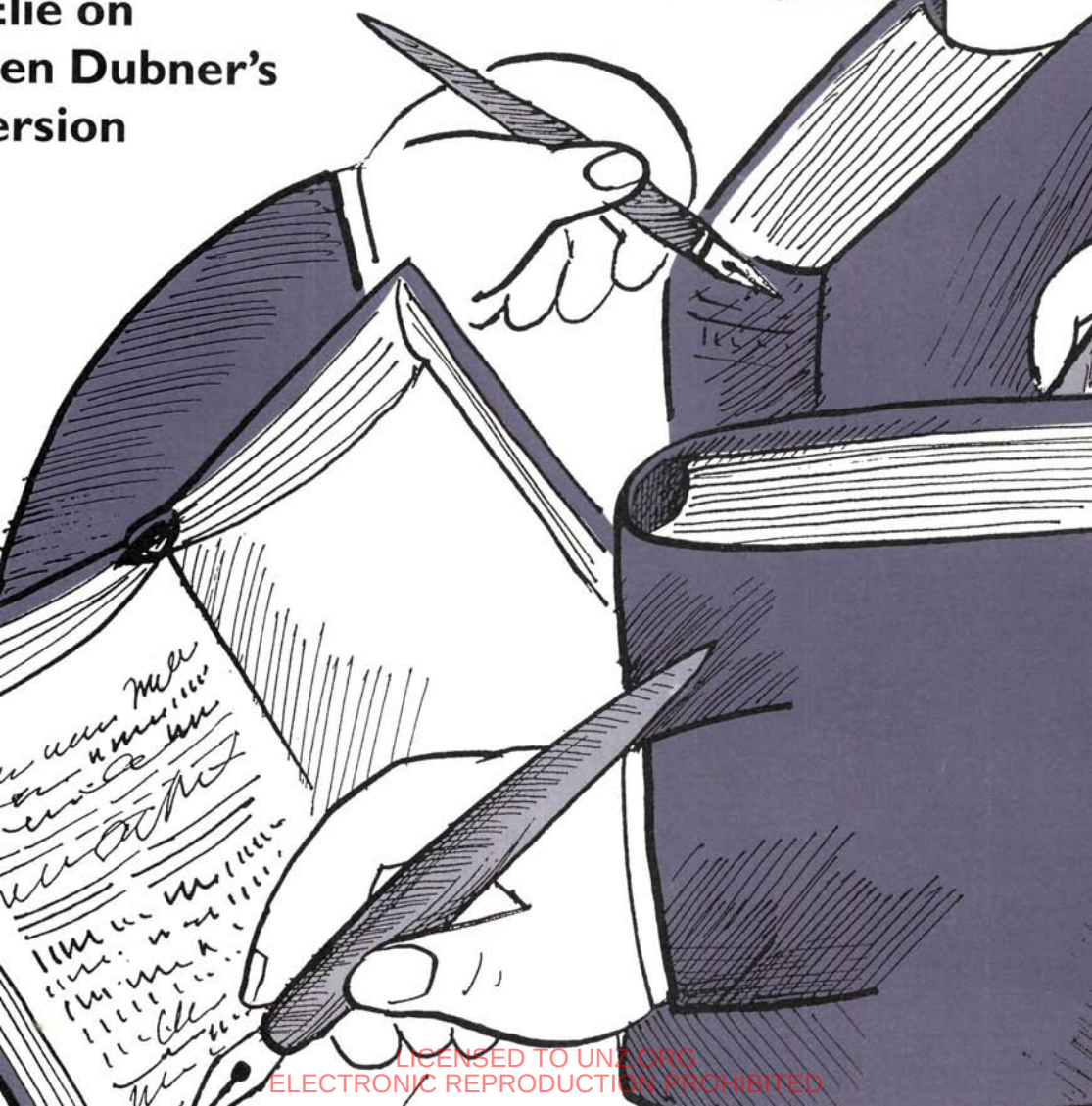

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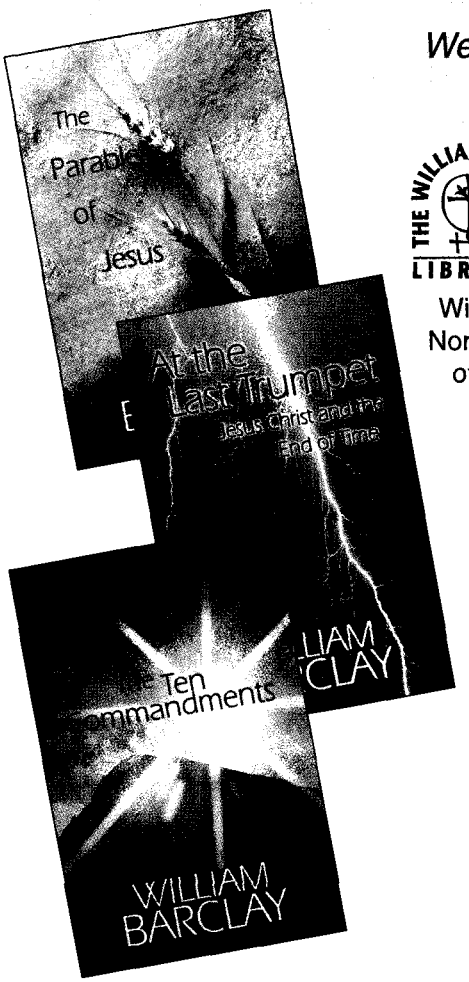

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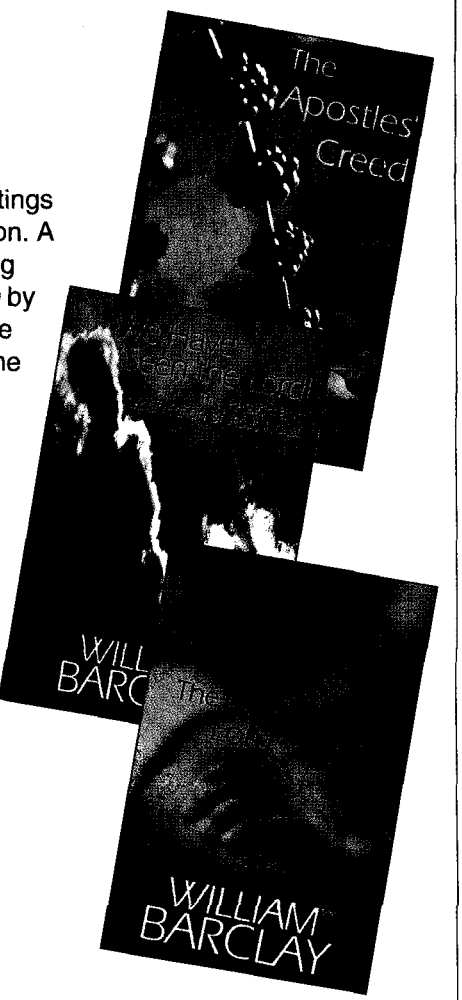

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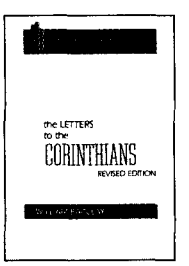

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COMMONWEAL

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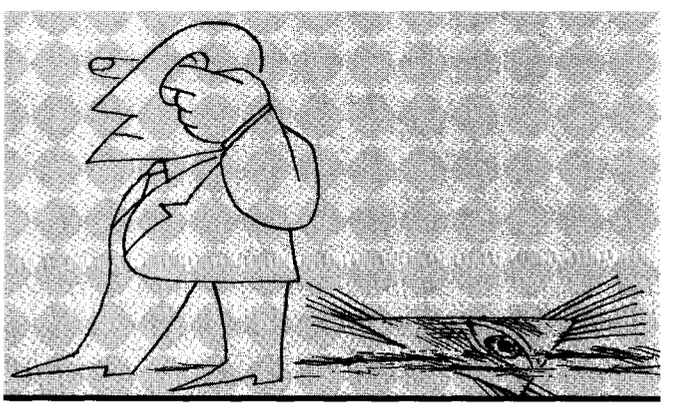

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To the Editors

Frank's touch

The news of Frank McConnell's sudden death shocked me [February 12]. I'll miss his frequent visits via *Commonweal*, his enthusiasm, his love for life, learning, art. His reviews and articles always cracked, snackled, and popped. I met him once at Notre Dame. He spoke as he wrote, with wit, insight, brilliance, and frankness. I don't believe a person could meet Frank—in person or in print—and not feel lucky to be alive. The worlds he touched will miss his light. It is suddenly dimmer here.

(REV.) BEN HOGAN, O. CARM.
Niagara Falls, Ont.

Those we must master

In *Commonweal*'s discussion of Catholic universities, John Cort's letter raises issues that require a response [February 12]. Cort refers to "the false prophets—Heidegger, Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Derrida," all of whom (except Sartre) I teach at an assertively Dominican college. I read these writers, not as prophets (true or false), but as philosophers whose arguments we must master before we accept or reject them (it is not a question of "what's hot"). Thus, unless Cort has studied the private language argument, and has intelligible reasons for regarding it as unsound, he has no grounds for objecting to my teaching. Likewise, if we want a Catholic economics, as I do, it is not sufficient to try to institute it and impose it by political means: someone has to wrestle with the Dismal Science in its own terms.

In short, a Catholic universtiy is not, as George Bernard Shaw thought, a contradiction in terms. But maintaining such a university requires a measure of adroitness that the theological right, with all its "passion and intensity," is likely to discount. There is a place for burning zeal in the religious life, but there is also a place for patient examination of issues that do not yield to oratory. "Involving the community" and "engaging the secular" are not always "rhetorical guff."

Saint Thomas Aquinas plundered the pagan Aristotle for concepts and arguments. (So does the Holy Father, at least if I read *Fides et ratio* correctly.) But the idea persists among "conservative" Catholics that we must resolve questions of philosophical truth on extraphilosophical grounds. Philosophy thus turns into theology, theology into politics, and politics into the use of centralized ecclesiastical power. Such a view represents an ironic triumph for the biggest false prophet of all, Nietzsche, who claimed that issues of truth were, always and inevitably, questions of power.

PHILIP E. DEVINE
Providence, R.I.

Poet's tribute ■ A colleague of Frank McConnell's at the University of California at Santa Barbara, I was honored and flattered by his encouragement of my work, as so many of us were. At the request of his widow Celeste I read the following poem at our memorial program for Frank.

Fast Forward Villanelle, from Frank McConnell's Funeral

A flock of friends is money in the bank,
And friends you had: they turned out in a horde.
You should have come to your own funeral, Frank,

Like Tom and Huck. Remember? That's a prank
You could have pulled. To keep from getting bored,
A flock of friends is money in the bank.

Old Father Virgil's homily wasn't swank
Despite his cream gown and its silken cord.
You should have come to your own funeral, Frank.

There are so many words that rhyme with *Frank*—
Blank, sank, thank, frank!—too plentiful a hoard.
A flock of friends, though: money in the bank

To blow on booze and jazz—fill up the tank,
One for the road, goose it, and crash the Ford.
You should have come to your own funeral, Frank.

Perhaps you did: when Ray and Eric thanked
You for your voice, we heard your voice restored.
A flock of friends is money in the bank.
Your should have come to your own funeral, Frank.

JOHN RIDLAND
Santa Barbara, Calif.

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War or peace in Kosovo?

Peacemaking is not easy, especially when war continues. Negotiating a peace is even more difficult when there is no real desire for peace among the combatants. That appears to have been the situation between the Serbs and the Albanian Kosovars as they ended their talks in Rambouillet, France on February 23. Does this mean the effort to make peace is the work of fools? Madeleine Albright and her French and British counterparts worked hard with a team of European and American diplomats to bring the bloodshed in Kosovo to an end. If their strenuous efforts now appear hapless, it is not they who have acted foolishly.

For several years, the Serbs, who claim Kosovo as their ancestral home, refused to return autonomy to the province whose dominant population is ethnic Albanian. The Yugoslav army has conducted a kind of low-intensity warfare against a population that initially adopted various forms of passive resistance. Under the political leadership of Ibrahim Rugova, the Albanians set to work, in the manner of other Eastern European liberation movements, creating political, educational, and cultural institutions parallel to those imposed by the Serbs in Belgrade. Over the past decade, this pacifist strategy worked well enough in creating a civic culture, but it did not win political autonomy for the province. A year ago, a fighting force, the Kosovian Liberation Army (KLA), appeared on the scene. It rejected Rugova's political strategy, and went to war against the Yugoslavs. Military action intensified and atrocities against civilians followed, the Yugoslav police and army against the Albanians and the KLA against the minority Kosovian Serbs. Scenes of mutilated bodies and fleeing refugees increased pressure for a settlement.

This past October, Richard Holbrooke, who helped end the Bosnian war, wrested a kind of cease-fire agreement from Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Matters cooled down somewhat during the winter with the presence of unarmed monitors operating under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation, but then flared again in the new year. Finally, sustained pressure from Europe and the United States, including a threat of NATO bombing, brought the Serbs to meet with a delegation of Albanian Kosovars, including Rugova and other political leaders as well as members of the KLA leadership. Although Rugova and his political allies have always understood that independence for Kosovo is a goal for the distant future, the KLA smelled victory in the support given by the Americans and Europeans. They seemed to have decided that with the peace talks they could achieve something greater than the return of provincial autonomy, namely national independence. And they held out for it at the talks in France. But without success.

Instead, the Albanians have gone home to "consult" on whether to accept a period of autonomy to be followed by a "referendum," which might lead to independence. The agreement requires that the KLA also lay down its weapons, while some 28,000 NATO troops would secure and guarantee the peace. Still, the agreement hammered out by the diplomats is so tentative that the Serbs have not yet signed onto it; in any case, they are unlikely to agree to independence for Kosovo. Nevertheless, the Serbs, who have proved so barbarous and recalcitrant, now find themselves holding the high ground in the diplomatic game, while the Koso-

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From the archives

Throughout 1999, Commonweal will be celebrating its 75th anniversary. Here from the August 7, 1964, issue is "Understanding the Conservatives" by Evelyn Waugh in a letter to the editor.

But more surprising to me is Mr. Cogley's apparent incomprehension of why there is a conservative party at all. A great part of the church's history, the life of half her champions, have been devoted to nothing else but conservation; the handing down uncontaminated and undiminished of inherited truth; the holding of the defenses on the unpopular front; the rebuke of fads and charlatans. The questions before most of the councils has not been: "Is this attractive notion something we should adopt?" but "Is this the faith as it was transmitted to us?"

EVELYN WAUGH

vars, who proved more fractious than expected, may have seized certain defeat from the jaws of partial victory. This defeat could prove more decisive and disastrous than anything the Kosovars have yet suffered at the hands of the Serbs.

Of course, there is much about the negotiations to which the media and the public are not privy. Perhaps the return of the various Alabanian factions to Kosovo is simply negotiation by other means; certainly they must settle among themselves before they can settle with the Serbs. Their weak point—and perhaps it is the position solely of the KLA—is the drive for national independence. All the other nations involved are adamantly opposed. Certainly the Serbs will not tolerate the loss of Kosovo. And from the beginning, the United States and Europe have been reluctant intervenors precisely because they feared the Albanians would move toward independence, a step that many calculate could further destabilize the whole region.

The initial fault lies with Milosevic, who a decade ago in a fit of nationalist jingoism, usurped Kosovian autonomy. But if the Albanian Kosovars hold out for independence and the KLA adopts the pillage-and-burn tactics of the Yugoslav army, there soon will be more than enough blame to go around. The danger is that the Western powers will throw in the towel and leave the Kosovar Albanians to the superior fire power of the Yugoslav army and the inexhaustible cunning of Slobodan Milosevic. There will be more atrocities and more refugees, and ultimately more anguished calls for Western intervention. Now is the time to settle. Now is the time for the Kosovar Albanians to choose peace and a partial victory.

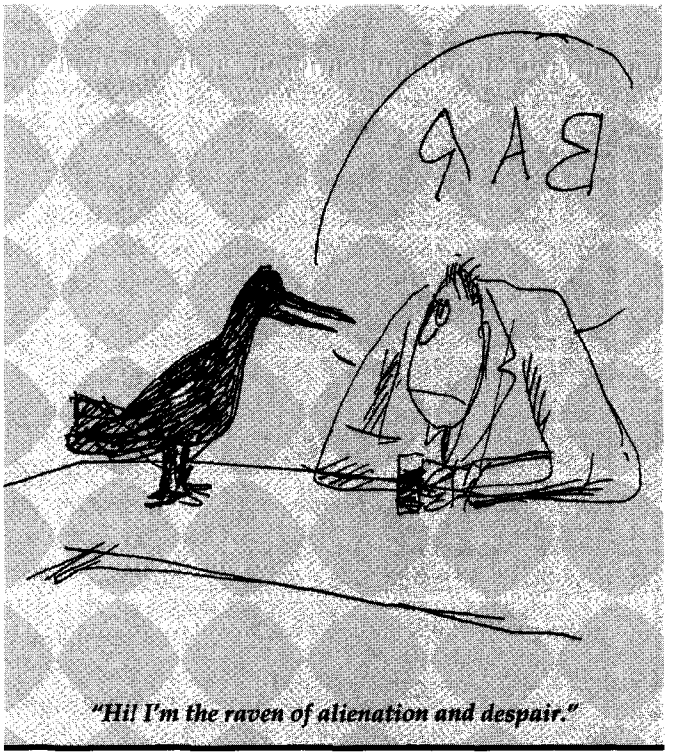
ET CETERA

RICHARD NEUHAUS MAY REPENT ■ The editor-in-chief of the monthly journal *First Things* has announced a change of heart, well sort of, about the heavy diet of minor and major chastisements that he dishes out in the section of his magazine labeled "The Public Square."

"I do not comment as often as I probably should on so much I come across that is cheering. I expect I should do something about that," Neuhaus writes in the March issue. "I mentioned some months back the editors of a magazine [he means *Commonweal*] who do not call this section 'The Public Square' but 'The Public Scold.' *They may have a point*" [emphasis ours]. He do go on for another column or thereabouts examining the pros and cons, as he puts it, of "avail[ing] myself of more opportunities to praise, or at least commend what is commendable." Alas, he sums up several hundred words later: "If I am not mistaken, I feel a bout of the old crankiness coming on."

We know exactly how he feels. It is hard to give up the sins of the past, especially crankiness. Crankiness is a vice to which editors often feel they have a special calling. So we offer a bit of spiritual guidance. Critical readers of "The Public Scold" note not only its shortage of cheery commendation but the highly selective nature of its reproaches. Folly and hypocrisy flourish in virtually every segment of our public life, but Neuhaus has a way of discovering it almost entirely on what might be called the religious and cultural left. If he can't give up crankiness altogether, a first step might simply be to spread it around a bit more equitably.

Meanwhile, we devoutly support him in his struggle against this terrible sin.



"Hi! I'm the raven of alienation and despair."

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OF SEVERAL MINDS

E.J. DIONNE, Jr.

TAX CUTS FOR THE RICH

John Kasich's trickle-down economy

Parables are not just the stuff of the Bible. They're an essential part of politics. Persuading people that your story matches reality as they see it will do more to win their hearts and minds than all the charts, graphs, and statistics you can muster.

Congressman John Kasich, (R-Ohio), understands this. When he announced for president last month, he touted his 10-percent across-the-board tax cut not with investment models, but with an American tale of self-improvement. He did not deny the tax cut would be helpful to the rich. He did something unusual: He defended the rich. "You see," Kasich said in his folksy way, "I come from this little town called McKees Rocks, where, if the wind blew the wrong way, you'd find yourself out of work. But you'd know, there's one thing I found out there. The only people who hate rich people are guilty rich people.

"You see"—Kasich loves us to see—"the people who are struggling every day in America, they realize that if a rich guy takes his money, invests it, creates a job—that I get the job. Then I go to college and I get smart, then I buy him out and he works for me. That's the way we see it in middle America." Only rarely does the story turn out exactly as Kasich tells it. But that's irrelevant—this is a parable. Americans do believe in upward mobility, even if it often takes a couple of generations to get there.

Now give Kasich credit. Unlike some of his colleagues who pretend that an across-the-board tax cut gives the same benefit to everybody, he puts the case for it plainly. It's designed to give the wealthy more money, which they're presumed to invest productively.

The facts, according to Citizens for Tax Justice, go like this: A 10-percent across-the-board tax cut is worth an average of $99 a year for taxpayers making less than $38,000, but $20,697 for the top 1 percent of taxpayers, who earn more than $301,000.

And that's the problem with Kasich's story—its premise is wrong. Handing well-to-do people all that cash is not the best way to help Kasich's friends in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, move up in the world. The better way to help working people get ahead is to give *them* the money directly.

Listen to Irwin Stelzer, director of regulatory studies for the Hudson Institute, and a proud Reaganite. In the conservative *Weekly Standard*, Stelzer writes that "the 10-percent tax cut that Republicans favor will return to the rich—a respectable word, properly used—far more dollars than it will to middle-class or poor families. Wall Street investment bankers and Hollywood movie stars will smile all the way to the bank...." Middle-class families, Stelzer continues, "will find themselves with so few extra dollars in their paychecks that they won't notice them."

Ah, but there are those incentives, right? Wrong, says Stelzer. "An investment banker is not likely to work harder if his taxes are cut by 10 percent, or at least is less likely to do so than some low earner who finds a meaningful increase in his pay packet."

The reason: "A dollar added to the take-home pay of a high earner is worth less to him than a dollar added to the pay of a low earner, just as a fifth pancake is worth less to a diner than the first one...." Thus does the parable of McKees Rocks meet the parable of the fifth pancake.

Stelzer's solution: Rather than cut taxes on the rich, Republicans should "push for tax relief for low earners—cut as many taxpayers from the rolls as available funds permit." In an interview, he argued that "if you're a Reaganite, the touchstone of tax policy ought to be incentives to work and create wealth." The incentives created by tax cuts are strongest for those who most need the extra money.

Republicans would do better with Stelzer's idea than Kasich's. And Democrats should see tax cuts for low earners as part of a package aimed at lifting the living standards of the have-nots and have-lesses. The other parts are health insurance, child care, and better schools. Arithmetic being a stubborn thing, tax relief will have to be balanced against the value of the other three.

Kasich poses the right question: What will best advance the cause of "the people who are struggling every day" in places such as McKees Rocks? The answer is not an across-the-board tax cut. □

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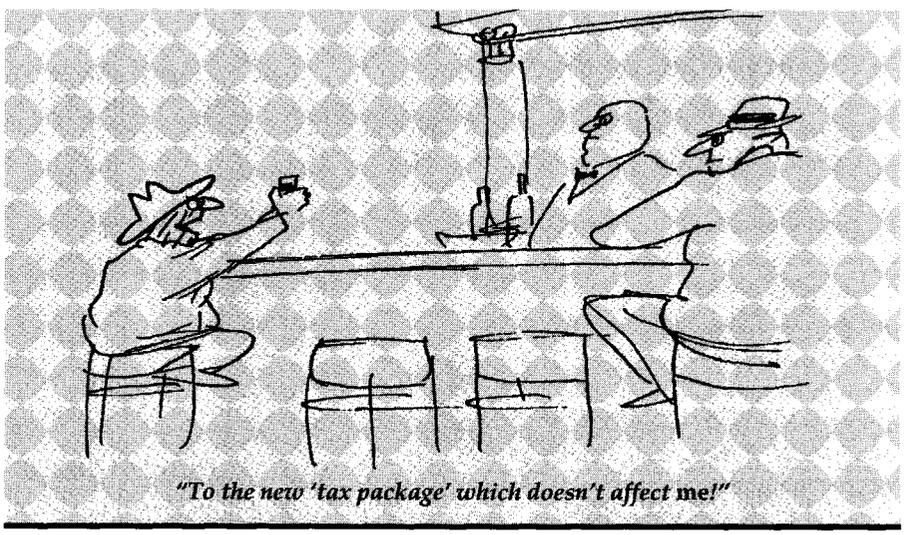

"To the new 'tax package' which doesn't affect **me!"**

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JOHN GARVEY

SNEERING AT RELIGION

Yes, the 'New Yorker'

If I had no problems at all with Roman Catholic teaching I suppose I would be Catholic, and not a member of the Orthodox church. But I do recognize simple anti-Catholic bigotry when I see it. Two examples come from recent issues of the *New Yorker*, and this is a shame, because after the departure of Tina Brown, who took it so deeply into banality, David Remnick has been making the *New Yorker* once again into a magazine you want to read. But some forms of bigotry remain acceptable in any company. In an embarrassing piece about his mother's love life in the January 18 issue, Jay McInerny refers to what he calls "the bullshit of Catholicism." Then, in a February 8 article about the earthquakes in Umbria which damaged Assisi, the usually perceptive Jane Kramer writes,

> Most people I asked about the Vatican's responsibilities to Assisi laughed, because the Vatican's responsibilities, as the Vatican sees them, are usually to its own survival, and have nothing to do with the little disruptions of the here and now. The Vatican spends its money and its craft on the institution of its own power—a policy set by Paul in the New Testament. And I think it's accurate to say that it is more interested in paying to discipline its dissident priests or to keep Catholics in the third world having babies than it is in restoring a damaged ceiling that somebody else will certainly pay to save.

I used to hear that last sort of line around people who belonged to a WASP country club in my midwestern home town where Jews, blacks, and Catholics were not welcome. The earlier part of the quote is really interesting, and I wonder where the allegedly razor-sharp *New Yorker* fact-checkers were. Saint Paul and the Vatican? Apart from the fact that Saint Paul had nothing to do with the then (and for many centuries more) nonexistent Vatican, Saint Paul's only marshalling of aid was undertaken for impoverished Christian communities, including the church in Jerusalem—proving the opposite of the point Kramer seems to want to make, if indeed point-making and not sneering is what she is about. About "craft" I don't know. Saint Paul never mentions it in any positive, pro-Vatican context I know of. It is, to say the least, a loaded and weird choice of words, the sort of thing extreme right-wingers accuse Masons and Jews of doing behind closed doors. Or anti-Catholics accuse Jesuits of doing. As Jane Kramer might say—given her already careless use of language and fact—whatever. And I love the phrase, "I think it is accurate to say"...preceding this absurd statement. (For that matter, in sheer practical economic terms, it really doesn't cost much to discipline a dissident priest or to encourage babies; ceiling restoration is much more expensive.)

Some Catholics would say that only Catholicism comes in for this sort of abuse, that it would be unthinkable for someone to refer to "the bullshit of Judaism," for example, and there is some truth to this, but the point could be misleading. Evangelical Christians come in for much the same sort of ridicule, and so do Orthodox Jews. I feel almost hurt that Orthodox Christians aren't hit with it, but then Orthodoxy has been called the best-kept secret in America. We also oppose abortion, and urge a demanding (some would call it counter-cultural) approach to life. What is really involved here is the perplexity felt by secular people when they meet a way of life which makes demands that don't accord with a secular agenda.

"Thank you very much—you've been an insensitive, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, sexually depraved audience."

This was revealed pretty clearly in an ad on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* on February 3. Above photographs of girls from every ethnic group the photographer could lay her hands on, a headline asks, or fairly roars, "CAN THEY EXPECT EQUALITY FROM CHURCH AND STATE?" In smaller, more sober type, the ad asks, "Will religion and politics be separate in our daughters' world?" The ad was taken out by the Center for Gender Equality, whose president is former Planned Parenthood head Faye Wattleton. Among other things, it worries that there has been an increase in the percentage of women who favor more restrictions on abortion, and places at the head of its alarms the fact that "the percentage of women who believe politicians should be guided by religious values has increased by more than 40 percent."

The Center for Gender Equality is happy that the news isn't all bad—the survey that worries them also reports "that the majority of women accept many of their denomination's religious teachings, but discard others that do not fit with their personal needs and experiences."

Here we get close to what makes secular people uncomfortable around Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Evangelical Protestantism, or any other form of religion that makes demands. Religion, from this point of view, is appropriate so long as it is a simple consumer choice, with the chooser allowed to accept or reject those parts of the tradition that "do not fit with their personal needs and experiences." The idea that needs and experiences are inevitably formed

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by something outside, something larger and more mysterious than the individual, is not only not a considered part of the question—to consider it would be profoundly threatening to our common culture.

As long as choice (the primary virtue, in a society based on consumption) is kept as the truest of all values, and as long as what forms those choices is unexamined—unless and until it threatens the values of the culture—the culture reigns supreme, Caesar is Lord, and the world can go on as it does. But to suggest that a serious life involves something deeper and more important than individual choice and our response to felt needs, which can be formed as easily as effective commercials can be written, is profoundly threatening to our kind of culture, and any solid religious tradition will—and should—represent a threat. Any religion that begins to tell the truth, or to suggest that as we are, we are not all right, will not leave us at ease, and this is why it is feared or—more cheaply—sneered at. □

Katharine Byrne

MRS. CLAYTON'S GIFT

There'll always be an Irish...

My mother used to visit old Mrs. Clayton often, and because she felt more comfortable with something to hang onto, even the hand of a ten-year-old, I was the reluctant child chosen to accompany her to the house on Hyde Park Boulevard shrouded in dusty plum-colored draperies and portieres, filled with ponderous mission oak furnishings, the walls crowded with pictures brought from Ireland when Mrs. Clayton came to this country from Limerick.

My mother called Charlie Clayton's widow—elderly, frail, and housebound—a "poor soul without chick nor child." But Charlie had been a successful liquor salesman and the genial proprietor of a prosperous saloon on Lake Park Avenue, the owner as well of a great many little apartments in the same building. Charlie died well-off and his wife, my mother was sure, had inherited a lot of money.

My father, on the other hand, while loving his children extravagantly, was unable to provide for them with any consistency, his feckless career changes rendered even more precarious by habitual gambling. He played poker and wasn't very good at it.

As we walked to Mrs. Clayton's home, my mother often reminded me that we must be good to this poor soul in the hope that she, a childless widow and not in the best of health, would be good to us. My mother would ask herself and voice the question to me, "Who's going to get all that money?" And answer the question rhetorically, "Why not us?"

When I was older I used to wonder: Was it not, after all, my mother who was the poor soul?

My mother had been educated at a convent school conducted by Ursulines, where she learned to embroider the deep hems of linen pillowcases, to play on a mandolin the pieces Bach composed for his young second wife, and to speak a little French in the German accents of Mother Stanislaus and Mother Hildegarde. Nothing remotely useful.

After graduating she went home to wait for someone to come along and marry her. While waiting, it was customary to find good works to do. As a volunteer at Hull House she met a charming and handsome young man new to the city but apparently doing well, working for his uncle who owned a commission house on South Water Street. He came to her house carrying long-stemmed roses and strawberries in the middle of winter, and leather-bound copies of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, crafted in the print shop at Hull House. "A guy with his head in the clouds," was the comment of one of my mother's pragmatic brothers. Demetrios, called Jim, was unlike anyone they had ever known. But here we were now, a dozen years later, struggling in free-fall financial circumstances, the family's poor relatives.

For Mrs. Clayton, my mother played the role of a cheerful, appreciative, helpful companion, willing to listen to repeated complaints and reminiscences, straightening antimacassars, plumping dusty sofa pillows. For my part, I

Correction

In the February 12 issue we accidentally printed the names of donors who had made a membership contribution to the Commonweal Associates on behalf of or in memory of someone else. We should have printed the names of those in whose honor an associate membership contribution was made. We sincerely apologize for the error.

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was polite and willing, running to the post office for two-cent stamps or to the store for tea and cat food. The tea was a mixture compounded according to Mrs. Clayton's recipe: one ounce each of oolong, souchong, and gunpowder assembled by the grocer at the A&P from bins along the wall of the store, black as coffee and served to us with milk out of Beleek cups sprigged with roses. The cats ate rice and King Oscar sardines. They stared at mother and child as though they knew and scorned our subtle machinations.

Apparently the old woman was glad of our presence, even speaking euphemistically of her intention to be good to us when the time should come. "You and the girl are my only friends," she would say.

Occasionally we would encounter another visitor, Mr. Clancy, a lawyer who collected the rents and handled Mrs. Clayton's affairs. She identified him as "a spoiled priest," a designation I did not understand, but it seemed to guarantee his integrity. Once he asked me my name and how to spell it. "Why does it begin with a 'K'?" he wanted to know. "She was named for her Greek grandmother," my mother had to admit. "The Greek alphabet does not contain a 'C.'" As though considering the legal consequences of such a failure, Mr. Clancy told us that there were nine women named Catherine in *The Lives of the Saints*, and all of them were spelled with a C. My mother was upset by this failure to comply, but she did take it as a good sign that he wanted to know how to spell my name.

Now it happened that one of my mother's brothers owned a great farm in Michigan. Every year in August we spent two weeks there, the happiest times of my young life: picking peaches, walking barefoot down a hot dusty road to the mailbox, crying over my Aunt Nancy's purple-bound copies of the life and hard times of Elsie Dinsmore.

But this was a bad summer for my mother. She seemed to think that if we had been at home things would have turned out differently. Mrs. Clayton, as my father cynically observed, "up and died on us." Died and was buried in our absence.

When Mr. Clancy conveyed the news to us, it was to tell my mother that although she was not one of the legatees according to the will, one of my older brothers could come to pick up something of sentimental value to the deceased. Not a good sign, my mother feared.

My brother Ed pulled his coaster wagon, the one that said *Chicago Daily News* on the side, a prize he had received for selling two subscriptions, to Mrs. Clayton's house, and was given a large flat package tied with heavy twine. Not even the Beleek china or the wicker tea cart, my mother noted bitterly as she unwrapped the pastel crayon portrait of Father Kenny, the priest who had baptized Mrs. Clayton in Limerick. The picture was stored in the front hall, a startling apparition to anyone who opened the door and didn't expect to find this florid presence staring from the depths of a clothes closet. It remained there when we moved to a smaller, darker place on Fifty-fifth Street. My mother was an intelligent woman. She learned from this experience that "you can't trust or depend on other people." Thereafter she concentrated her resources—money she was able to wheedle from her brothers and secrete in a special account—on her most promising child, my brother Ed, whom she contrived to put through six years of college, including law school. He did not marry until quite late in life, and was always good to his mother. □

Katharine Byrne *writes from Chicago.*

James D. Moore

ONE YEAR DOWN

Oregon's assisted-suicide law

Contrary to the utopian dreams of ardent supporters and the dire predictions of some opponents, assisted suicide was a little-used option among the terminally ill in Oregon in 1998, the first complete year under the state's new assisted-suicide law. The questions raised by assisted suicide, however, continue to be a part of political, social, cultural, and religious discussions throughout the state.

According to the Oregon Health Division's first annual report on assisted suicide, issued an February 17, 1999, by the end of 1998, twenty-three people had received legal drugs to end their lives under the provisions of the law. Of these twenty-three, fifteen had actually used the drugs and died; six others had died from their illnesses; and two were still alive. Contrary to expectations, AIDS cases accounted for only two of the twenty-three. Most of those who applied for the drugs had cancer, with heart disease coming in second place. The Oregon Health Division will be sending out surveys to doctors throughout the state in 1999 to gauge how many requests have been made for information on assisted suicide, whether or not doctors suspected depression among those requesting assisted suicide, and what might have caused patients to drop their request for assisted suicide.

Oregon's largest newspaper, the *Oregonian*, which has strongly opposed assisted suicide editorially, has printed a number of articles examining the lives and the decisions of patients as they agonize over whether or not to invoke the assisted-suicide law. These stories, coupled with the low number of people using the law, indicate that a middle way is developing between the extreme predictions of the two sides in the assisted-suicide debate.

The fight against assisted suicide in Oregon has shifted since the overwhelming November 1997 vote, in which 60 percent of those who cast ballots favored the measure. Several members of Congress, led by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Congressman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) raised issues concerning the role of federal agencies regulating the prescription of lethal drugs by Oregon's doctors. But in April 1998, Attorney General Janet Reno ruled that Oregon's law fell with-

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in federal guidelines and that doctors who prescribed the drugs were not in danger of losing their licenses to dispense controlled substances. Both Hatch and Hyde have promised to revisit this issue during the 106th Congress.

In Oregon itself, opposition to the law has come from two fronts. First, the *Oregonian* has maintained its editorial attacks, focusing on the potential problems, the lack of respect for human life, and the regulatory murkiness of the law. Second, the groups that opposed the law have raised a number of issues about it in the context of health care throughout the state.

For example, in October, William Toffler, M.D., the director of Physicians for Compassionate Care and a faculty member at Oregon Health Science University (Oregon's medical school), published an op-ed essay in the *Oregonian* in which he noted that a pain medication, Oxycontin, had been capped in its dosage by the Oregon Health Plans prescription company. The implication was that the Oregon Health Plan, which prioritizes medical procedures for coverage in order to provide the widest care possible to the poor, had approved assisted suicide for coverage but denied coverage for pain management. This may have been a good political ploy (although very few people noticed the issue), but it played loose with the facts. The plan's decision to cap the amount of Oxycontin was based on the simple fact that there are other effective pain-control alternatives that are one-tenth as expensive per dose as Oxycontin.

Attempts to change Oregon's law have now shifted to the biennial Oregon legislature where several pending bills would tinker with the rules for assisted suicide. However, none would attempt to repeal assisted suicide itself. Following the resounding 1997 vote, no state legislator wants to be seen as trying to overturn the law.

The annual report had a couple of surprises. Of the fifteen who chose assisted suicide, only one cited the lack of pain control as the reason. Most said they chose death because of a fear of a loss of autonomy, the inability to participate in important roles, or the loss of control over bodily functions. Since the debate over the assisted-suicide law has often focused on pain control, this information from the survey raises new important issues. Another surprise was that only two of those who took their own lives were married at the time. Four of the fifteen had never been married and the other nine were widowed or divorced. This may indicate that family support groups are important to those who decide against assisted suicide.

Anecdotal evidence and the 1998 annual report paint a picture of a procedure that is just starting to be accepted and used. The number of patients who chose this option last year was so small that virtually no conclusions can yet be drawn from the Oregon experience. To date, however, Oregon has not become the magnet for suicide seekers opponents claimed it would. We will have to wait to see if that remains the case in the future. The annual reports will be watched closely. □

James D. Moore *is a member of the political science faculty at the University of Portland.*

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WHERE ISLAM & CHRISTIANITY MEET

Saint Moses in the Syrian desert

Gabriel Saiad Reynolds

To reach the Monastery of Saint Moses (*Mar Musa* in Arabic), you'll need determination, patience, and a good pair of walking shoes. Yet while it may not be easy to get there, many people find it even more difficult to leave.

I first heard about Mar Musa from a Jesuit friend living in Jordan, who had never visited but had heard of this mixed-gender, ecumenical community recently founded at the site of an ancient monastery. My instructor in Islamic studies at Yale (also a Jesuit) encouraged me to head out to visit the monastery, not only for a retreat but also to report on the monastery's interest in dialogue with Muslims. He too had never visited. So I set out from the comfortable surroundings of the Jesuit community in Beirut for the Syrian desert, on a hot August day, prepared only with a map that a friend had jotted down on a piece of notebook paper.

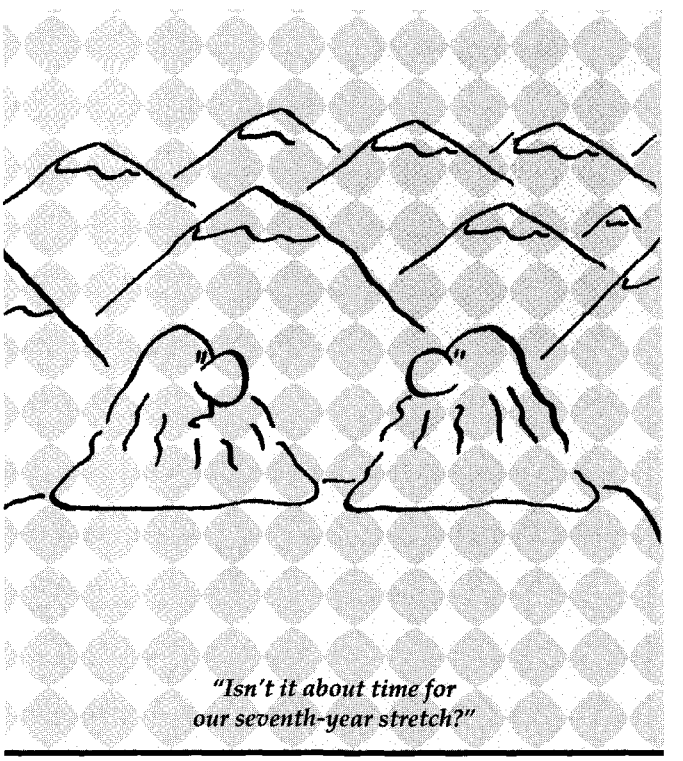
From Beirut, my first obstacle was getting into Syria. The border guards told me they would be happy to renew my expired visa, but that their boss was having a nap. After waiting several hours for him to wake up, I crossed the border on foot (my taxi gave up waiting for me) and found a bus that took me to the city of Homs. Unfortunately, all of the buses leaving from Homs to Nebek (my destination) had left. "No problem," a newfound friend told me, "catch a bus to Damascus and ask them to slow down when you pass Nebek." The bus slowed just enough so that I did not seriously injure myself on the black asphalt highway.

From Nebek, an old Christian town (although today there are few Christians left), there's little hope of finding the monastery without a guide, and little hope of getting a guide to take you at night. So I spent the night on the stone floor of a church and climbed into the back of a pickup truck in the morning. Rumbling outside of town through the barren wilderness, I began to doubt that a vibrant community could exist in such a setting. Yet as our truck pulled up at the foot of a great ravine between two jagged red mountains, Mar Musa came into view.

The small stone monastery, nestled into the crevice for protection against the elements (and bandits), formed a stark contrast to the desolate landscape. Cries of visiting children, clanging bells of the community's goats, colorful laundry flapping in the breeze, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee all brought my senses to life. Then after a steep and treacherous climb from the ravine's floor, the wide smile and deep voice of the community's founder, Father Paolo, greeted me. I knew I would like it here.

In August 1982, Paolo Dall'Oglio of the Society of Jesus had arrived at the ruins of the ancient monastery. He was moved by its potential to be not only a center for the reinvigoration of Christian life, but also one of Christian-Islamic interaction. Restoration of the monastery commenced in 1984. In 1989, restoration of the church itself began, and after running youth camps at the site for several summers, the monastery of Mar Musa officially became active again in 1991, with a community of two.

The community has grown slowly and today includes three women and four men, housed in separate buildings. Their work is ceaseless. Besides running the farm around the monastery, they welcome thousands of guests a year in half a dozen languages. In fact, the consecrated members take a pledge of hospitality. Every visitor is sure to receive delicious food, a warm cup of tea, and an even warmer smile.



"Isn't it about time for our seventh-year stretch?"

Gabriel Saiad Reynolds *is currently pursuing a doctorate in Islamic Studies at Yale University. This is his first contribution to* Commonweal.

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The sisters and brothers consider this their missionary work. Instead of going into the world, the world comes out to them.

As the monastery has grown, Dall'Oglio and the Syrian Catholic diocese have made sure it is firmly grounded in and informed by its past. The goal of the consecrated members of the community is the same as that of their predecessors a thousand years earlier: to seek spiritual growth and perform ecclesiastical service through lives of prayer, chastity, and retreats of solitude.

Yet Dall'Oglio's concern for the future of Arab churches (he himself joined the Syrian Catholic rite) led to the development of a monastic life that would be quite foreign to the original monks. For Mar Musa seeks to edify these churches by encouraging ecumenism and interreligious association. Accordingly, the community is open to members of all Christian denominations who feel themselves in accord with the community's theology. Moreover, they are convinced that the Arab churches must not confront or even compete with their Muslim neighbors, but rather serve Muslims, learn from them, and take on sacrifice for their sake.

This ideology, or in fact this theology, is represented by the term "inculturation" (Arabic *inthaqaf*), which was first popularized by the French Islamicist Louis Massignon and later by the Egyptian Mary Kahil. The demand of inculturation is for Christians to realize both their spiritual and historical kinship with Muslims and to exemplify the Christian vocation of voluntary sacrifice, so as to find meaning and identity in the Islamic context.

The desire for inculturation with Muslims, however, is not something novel in the Syrian church. In fact, Syrian Christians have historically maintained a relatively harmonious relationship with their Muslim neighbors, who at times protected the church from Greek Orthodox persecution. Evidence of this amity is literally carved into the walls of the church at Mar Musa, where the oldest inscription opens with the Muslim formula *"Bi-ism Allah al-Rahmtin al-Rahim"* ("In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Benevolent"), and dates the construction of the church to the Islamic year 450 A.H. (Christian year 1058).

The relatively good relationship between the Syrian church and Islam has allowed Mar Musa to emphasize, or at times reinstate, those liturgical practices that coincide with Islamic practices. Thus, the church floor of Mar Musa is not lined with pews but is covered with carpets as in a mosque. As at mosques, worshippers always remove their shoes before entering the sanctuary. The prayer itself often includes a series of four full bows (*sujud* in Islamic terminology), where each individual touches his or her forehead to the floor. However, instead of facing Mecca as Muslims do, worshippers align themselves to the East as the earliest Christians had done. Moreover, crucifixes are nowhere prominent inside or outside the sanctuary, and Syriac (the

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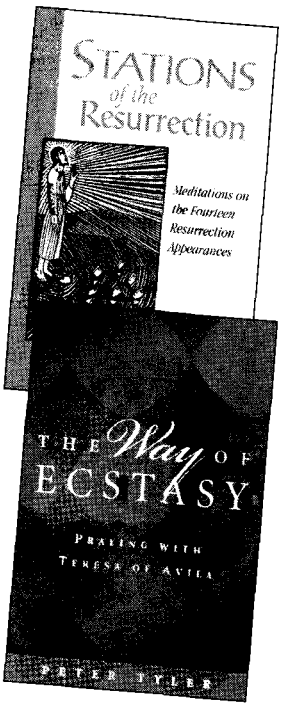
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liturgical language of the Syrian Catholic church) is generally dispensed with in favor of Arabic.

In these ways, the Mar Musa community seeks to make the monastery environment familiar and comfortable to Muslim visitors. Nevertheless, they emphatically affirm that such practices are not innovations aimed at appeasing or attracting Muslims. Rather, they are expressions of a Semitic spirituality common to eastern Muslims, Christians, and Jews. In the words of Dall'Oglio, the monastery seeks "a cultural incarnation of the depths of the project of the saving God for the good of Islam and Muslims."

In addition to the current dynamism of the monastery, the visitor (particularly an American) is struck by the long history of Mar Musa. A Roman tower once stood on the present site of the monastery, from which the road below and passing trade were monitored. The monastery itself was likely built no later than A.D. 575. This is the date of the British Museum manuscript, a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Saint John Chrysostom, that identifies itself as belonging to the monastery of Mar Musa.

The earliest evidence within the monastery itself is a clearly visible inscription which dates the building of the church of "Saint Moses the Prophet" to A.D. 1058. Thereafter, the monastery flourished for several hundred years and became the seat of the Syrian Orthodox bishopric. During this time, Saint Moses and the surrounding caves overflowed with monks who were known for their brilliant illumination of manuscripts. If you search the caves you can find traces of the monks, in the inscriptions and memorials they left behind.

Through the centuries, the monastery fell into disrepair. In 1831, it was abandoned and it remained empty for over one hundred and fifty years. During this time, it was repeatedly the victim of theft and the very roof of the church was removed for building materials. Finally, in 1983, a fire struck the church, destroying many of its frescoes and the iconostasis.

The history of Mar Musa matches the ups and downs of its patron saint. According to the traditional account, Saint Moses led a long and lucrative career as a thief in Ethiopia, before being pursued by the authorities and forced to seek refuge among hermits in the wilderness. There he was converted to Christianity, and his piety became as intense as his impiety had been. Still a wanted man, Moses headed north from Ethiopia to Egypt, where he was ordained and retired as a hermit. He died in 395 and was buried at the monastery of al-Baramus in Egypt, where his body is still venerated. Today, the Syrian church often represents Moses in a manner close to that of Saint George: a knight riding a horse and slaying a dreadful beast that is the incarnation of evil.

Today, the fledgling community at Mar Musa is intensely aware of its troubled past and its fragile future. For the Christian churches of the Arab lands are endangered today, split into scores of sects and divided by a bitter legacy of contention that traces back to the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Meanwhile, each year Christians become a smaller minority as a result of a lower birth rate and higher rate of emigration than Muslims. Those Christians who do remain stand in a precarious social position, being fully integrated neither with their Islamic neighbors nor with Western culture, which has shown little interest in the fate of Eastern Christianity. Yet Mar Musa does not look west for guidance. Rather, it embraces its minority status, emphasizes its Semitic heritage in the roots of the Syrian church, and believes that these will allow Christianity to be more fully alive in the Islamic context.

While its effect on the church worldwide is the subject of debate, the theology of inculturation is crucial to Mar Musa. It affirms the uniqueness of Eastern Christians and their deep and authentic roots in the Arab world. It also provides a channel for Christians to better understand Islam, and affirm their own rights in Islamic society. And finally, it suggests that Eastern Christianity must engage Islam, not merely as a question of style, but as a matter of survival.

Leaving the monastery behind at the end of the month, with my spirit refreshed and my head spinning with ideas, I reflected on the venture of Mar Musa. I don't know if it will succeed; the obstacles are great, but I know that I will be back, and many like me. For the abundance of life in the midst of the wilderness gives hope in the persevering human spirit and in the enduring grace of God, "which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast..." (Hebrews 6:19). □

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Richard Alleva

GOD'S SARCASM

'The Thin Red Line'

Some writer was once described as being long on genius but short on talent. Terence Malick, who wrote and directed *The Thin Red Line*, actually has plenty of both, and his masterpieces of the '70s, *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, exist to prove it. But the peculiar exigencies of making a World War II combat movie have discombobulated his talent without obliterating his genius. The new film stumbles time and again, but a vision of war as Original Sin, the canker in the rose of life, shines steadily through.

First, let's get a comparison, not odious but inevitable, out of the way, for there's no denying that Malick's film dwells rather in the shadow of *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg's film drives forward ruthlessly to its climax with the force of great, brutal, unshaded art. Despite minor glitches, it never swerves. *The Thin Red Line* meanders, runs into fog, has moments of inanity, even downright goofiness. *Ryan*'s battle scenes seek to engulf us with the terror felt by the soldiers, while Malick wants to give us a certain distance from the violence even as his camera plunges into it—a Buddhistic calm strives to make itself felt amid the fury.

The story takes the audience with the U.S. Army's Charley Company into the invasion of Guadalcanal. Malick uses James Jones's novel, laden with the minutiae of battle and of men getting on each other's nerves, to meditate on the nature of man and the nature of nature. Much of this reaches us through the consciousness of Witt (Jim Caviezel), a country boy who seems to have read a surprising amount of Ralph Waldo Emerson, judging by his meditations heard on the soundtrack. "Is each person just part of one large soul?" he asks. Then why does each particle of that soul try to destroy the others? "Why can't we just reach out and touch the glory?" And is nature itself at war with nature? Is that what's killing us? Conversely, why is life so beautiful both in its physical aspect (this is emphasized by the beauty of Guadalcanal itself) and in the human capacity for tenderness, loving sexuality, compassion?

And how must a man live his life? Like Witt, who goes AWOL whenever the impulse to bask in nature and consort with islanders seizes him, but who also demonstrates devotion to his company when he returns to action? Or is the way of Witt's enemy/friend, Welsh (Sean Penn), preferable, who maintains a philosophy of absolute nihilism? Does it matter to the world at large, since the life-loving Witt kills in combat as any soldier must, while the seemingly life-despising Welsh ("In this world a man's nothing...and there's no other world") can't help being generous and self-sacrificing, especially on Witt's behalf? (Like Prewitt and Sergeant Warden in *From Here to Eternity*, also by James Jones, the two men seem to reflect each other's possibilities, which may be why they both deplore and love each other.)

And, in light of the yoked bestiality and tenderness resident in men, how does a leader lead? Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) is determined to keep his agenda on track, no matter how many of his men die. But Captain Staros (Elias Koteas in a particularly subtle performance), believing you can't win in war if you don't have the trust of your men, refuses to sacrifice them for the sake of strategy. (Moreover, he's just too humane to regard humans as pawns fit for sacrifice.) Which man is right? Or is some synthesis possible?

Given the themes of this movie, Terence Malick was exactly the right man to make it.

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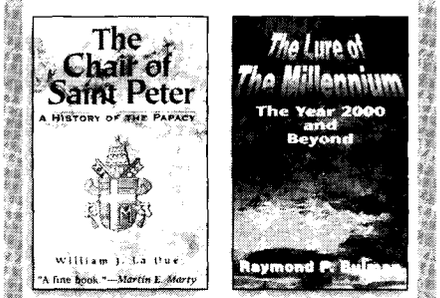
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And given the genre and scope of this movie, Terence Malick was exactly the wrong man to make it.

He was the right man because, among American filmmakers, he is the supreme brooder over humanity's inexaustible talent for destroying itself. There is a scene in which a dying Japanese soldier seems to plead with a G.I. for a moment of understanding. Full of a hate oddly gentled by fascination with impending death, the American, wagging his finger tic-toc like a metronome, kills the prisoner's hope of comfort and indicates that the world wants no more of his existence. Matching this is a close-up of a Japanese face, seemingly petrified in an avalanche of earth and gazing out at the Americans like a bas-relief. The G.I.s seem to hear the buried corpse's voice warning them that he once felt as much life as they do now, and that soon they will be as dead as he is.

Malick broods just as much over man's capacity for tenderness. Look at the death scene he gives Woody Harrelson. Playing a macho redneck sergeant who accidentally blows himself up with a grenade, Harrelson seems to subside into a child as death seeps into him. His men hover above him, sheepishly assuring him that: (a) he won't die, and that (b) he will die but not in vain. Humanity as tender and as atrocious as this seldom reaches the screen, even in good movies.

Though not a virtuoso director of action sequences like Spielberg, Malick nevertheless gets exactly what he needs: cross-hatchings of sporadic anguish and terror within the larger picture of overwhelming violence: Nolte's colonel spasmodically raking his fingers through his scalp as Captain Staros radios his refusal to obey orders; a crawling soldier in a field singing with bullets suddenly swerving away from a gorgeous and malevolent-looking snake.

Aided by cinematographer John Toll, Malick uses the beauty of nature to emphasize rather than mitigate the horror of death. The very second after several G.I.s are shot down on a hillock and their bodies drop down into the long, waving grass, the sun lights everything up in glory. It's like God practicing sarcasm.

But: Though Malick has an epic sense

of physical space, his talent operates best with a small cast of characters. *Badlands* has two protagonists and *Days of Heaven* four (though both movies are rich in colorful minor roles). But a war film that takes on an entire company as a sort of group protagonist requires that a filmmaker define each soldier quickly by focussing on a few defining gestures or traits. (Granted, this solution lends itself all too easily to caricature.) Otherwise, in scenes of combat where darkness, filth, and fast confusing action obscure the identities of all but the instantly recognizable, the audience is going to lose track of what is happening to whom, and this breeds irritation and lack of empathy for the suffering men.

This happens time and again in *Red Line*. When a soldier played by John Cusack volunteers for a mission, Colonel Tall beams and says he expected such bravery from this particular man. Why? Later, Tall says that he feels toward Cusack like a father. How come? There was no previous relationship between the two shown on screen.

When a soldier kills one of the enemy for the first time, his inner voice, heard on the soundtrack, expresses both shock and exultation. "It's the worst thing you can do...nobody can touch me for it!" Is this simply a normal man shocked by his first kill or the possible genesis of a criminal? We can't know because we don't know this character.

In hope of tipping the odds toward survival, another soldier steals an officer's pistol on the transport ship. What becomes of the thief and the pistol? Since we never find out, why was the scene left in?

The part of Bell, who yearns obsessively for his beautiful wife back home, is played by Ben Chaplin, who (at least in battle fatigues) bears a striking resemblance to Jim Caviezel's Witt. Many scenes featuring one of them began confusingly for me because I thought I was looking at the other guy, a confusion prolonged by the fact that the two share no scenes. The physical similarity is unfortunate because their inner lives are so different: Bell's love is erotic, fixed on one woman, while Witt's *agape* is for the entire human race and includes the enemy.

Does Malick share Witt's intuition that all humans are just so many pieces of coal flung from one huge fire? If so, did this subtly undermine the dramatist's task of keeping characterizations distinct? Or was there a more familiar problem to which many filmmakers fall prey? In an interview with PBS's Charlie Rose, Nolte remarked that there were at least two other versions of *Red Line* left on the cutting room floor that could have been released instead of the one that we have. Perhaps we will see them in alternative-version video cassettes. But though I'm eager for those other *Red Lines* if they exist, that doesn't mitigate my frustration with the current version or keep me from wishing that Malick had sharpened his focus on the characters of Colonel Tall, Captain Staros, Sergeant Welsh, and Private Witt, since it is these four who carry the movie's themes.

Still...I stop at a red light and think of Nolte raking his scalp as Staros's voice defies him on the walkie-talkie. I stand at a grocery check-out line and remember the Japanese soldier pathetically waving a stick to keep the onrushing Americans away from the body of a fallen comrade, and the way the Americans throw him puzzled looks but run on without hurting him. I stand in line for yet another movie, something I won't remember two hours or even two minutes after seeing it, and the sight of Sean Penn as Welsh kneeling at the grave of Witt comes back to me, and the way Penn asks, with a touch of scorn and with infinite love, "Where's your spark now?"

You know those cold-relief capsules that supposedly release their pellets in your system for twelve hours after you swallow them? *The Thin Red Line* is a slow-release capsule for the mind. □

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Choosing your religion

Turbulent Souls
A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family
Stephen J. Dubner
William Morrow & Company, $24, 320 pp.

Paul Elie

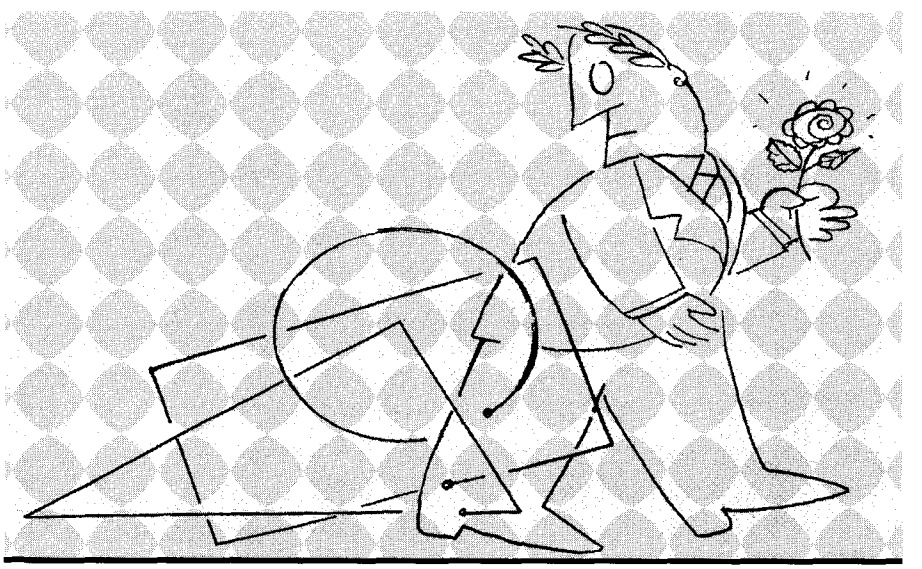
Stephen Dubner and I met on the first day of graduate school and established a kind of friendship based on obvious likenesses. He was from upstate New York and so was I. We had both been messing around with music but now we were going to be serious about learning how to write. Neither of us had thought we would wind up at a fancy university, and we didn't know whether to call attention to our surprise or keep quiet about it. And it gradually emerged that both of us were religious. I was a Catholic and Stephen was a—well, he wasn't sure what he was, but he was animated, even agitated, by the question. He had been brought up Catholic, the youngest child in a big Catholic family. Before that, his parents had been Jews. Those days, he and his wife went to Episcopal services in Greenwich Village. What was he? And did it matter?

Judaism, the subtitle of his book suggests, is where he finds his answers. Really, though, Judaism is where he finds his questions. The big question turns out to be not *What am I?* but *Who am I?*, and the nearest thing to an answer he can give is the book itself. It is the story of his parents' lives as Jews and their conversions to Catholicism during World War II. It is the story of their marriage and family life on a farm near Albany, a happy time until Stephen's father died after having a stroke during a charismatic prayer service when Stephen was ten. Finally, it is the story of Stephen's dogged investigation into his family history and his own return (or conversion) to Judaism, against his mother's insistence that Catholicism is the one true faith.

"Until not so long ago all I knew, and dimly at that, was that my parents had once been something called Jewish," he recalls early in the book. "We lived in the back of beyond; ours was an existence circumscribed by Mass and catechism, rusting hay rakes and muddy fishing ponds, the kids you could play with (the churchgoing Catholics) and those you couldn't. For all I knew about Jews, my parents might have just as well been Baptists, or Elks, or carnival workers."

But they were Jews—had been Jews—and in the early chapters Stephen recreates their lives as Jews in Brooklyn before the war, an account so solid and recognizable that you forget it is made up of facts he had to coax out of long-lost relatives with a notebook and a tape recorder. His mother, Florence Greenglass, studied ballet in Manhattan with an instructor whose Orthodox Christian faith stirred her to convert to Catholicism, "the *true* church." His father, Solomon Dubner, the son of a sternly Orthodox shopkeeper, an ambitious young man but one prone to depression, was converted on Hawaii during the war and returned home in high spirits, but when his father found a rosary in his pants pocket he sat *shiva*, never to say Solomon's name again. Sol and Florence met at a Catholic Action meeting and were married soon afterward, taking the Christian names Paul and Veronica to symbolize their conversion to the faith that, they now believed, fulfilled Judaism and superseded it, end of story.

On Long Island, then in upstate New York, they raised a family according to Catholic Worker farming principles of "cult, culture, and cultivation," and with some of the joyful eccentricity of the family in *Cheaper by the Dozen*. Paul Dubner, not a farmer but a newspaperman, went nowhere without his scapular—or his Associated Press *Stylebook*. It was a house rule that no two children (there were eight of them) could root for the



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same baseball team. Processed sugar was forbidden. So were television, open religious dissent, and questions about the family's Jewish ancestry.

Stephen, the youngest, was an altar boy—"the policeman of the Catholic world: vaguely above the law, a uniformed executor of ceremonial duties, with special access to the highest authorities, if necessary." He was so terrified of divine retribution that he vomited in his sleep one night after giving wrong directions to some nuns who were passing through town. As "a natural pleaser," so he recalls now, he went along with his family's religion even when he began to lose faith in it; when his father died and the Catholic charismatics said God had taken him somewhere better, Stephen stopped believing in the Christian faith once and for all.

When I see Stephen nowadays—after the book tour, after all the nice reviews, after the Christmas episode of "Nightline" devoted to his conversion—he sheepishly describes himself as a guy who happened on a good story that happens to be his own story. His modesty is appealing, but a little misleading, too. There's more than a good story here. After all, the conversions of Jews to Catholicism aren't altogether uncommon; nor is the Dubner family's extra-strength Catholic devotion; nor is his falling away from Catholicism. Nor is his conversion to Judaism, for as he pointed out in a piece in the *New York Times Magazine*, many people his age are "choosing their religion," throwing off the faith of their childhood and claiming a different one as adults.

No, what is remarkable about this story is the deep religious yearning Stephen brought to his search for his origins—the way he followed the story all the way to its conclusion, and now has refashioned it as a classic conversion story in his book. "Nightline" made Stephen's story look like a search for his lost father; sociology makes it look like a swap of a religion of answers for a religion of questions. Another convert to Judaism, David Klinghoffer, has accused Stephen (on *Slate*) of being indifferent to the notion of religious truth—and Stephen reports that he gave himself "many a headache" worrying about his motives: "Had I embarked on nothing more than a glorified search for my roots?"

But my own impression, reading the book, is of how driven Stephen was to find a way to know God and know the truth about himself, not merely to choose a religion or fill in the blanks in his family story; and the book conveys a feeling that he is in the grip of something, that "the blood is calling." Yes, but that God is calling, too. On a college road trip, he feels a sharp, abrupt, sexual attraction to a Jewish woman thirty years older than he is. In New York, his girlfriend Abigail, an Episcopalian, introduces him to a drama teacher who makes him feel that his family's Jewish past is unfinished business. "Son, you'd have been plenty Jewish for Hitler," Ivan Kronenfeld says. "Not that you should let the Nazis define you, or anyone else. But *you* should figure it out. So you're not *really* Jewish and you're not *really* being a Christ-

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ian....You think your parents did what they did just so you'd walk away from it?" He goes to morning Eucharist with Abigail on Ash Wednesday and then to teach a writing class, worried what the student who is an Orthodox Jew will think of the smudge on his forehead: "I was quite sure he took me to be a Jew. I had certainly encouraged this perception; in what sort of warped flirtation had I trapped myself?"

Just after he gets a coveted job at the *Times*—when common sense would have told him to keep his desk clear—he takes the side job of writing a synopsis of the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, eighty thousand words in three months, and he feels the Rebbe's teachings work their way into him, and comes to feel that Jewish teaching has been a part of him all along. "Schneerson believed that when the soul is in torment (when *isn't* it? I thought), it is yearning to be reunited with its divine source...such a soul lay inside me. It always had. Did it come from my parents? From God? What *was* God anyway? The stern patriarch of my parents' house? A brilliant invention? A fraud? Or perhaps something I hadn't yet considered?"

Practically before he knows it, Stephen is an observant Jew and a "poster boy" for the return-to-Judaism movement, having told his story in the *Times Magazine*. He is invited to give talks, to share *Shabbos* dinners, to light the big outdoor menorah at a synagogue on the Lower East Side, although he doesn't know how to say the prayers. "I climbed the ladder, a hundred faces glowing beneath me in the throw of the streetlamps. The opposite side of the street was lined with Indian restaurants, and a dozen waiters watched from the sidewalk, greatly attentive....On the final *brucha*, I heard a sharp *ping*: the crooked candle had shattered the glass globe, which fell with a tinkle onto the concrete below. I was not meant, I concluded, to be a light unto the nations."

That passage suggests the literary qualities of this book: a plain style, flecked with Yiddishisms (I suspect he wanted to call the book *Noisy Souls*); vivid scenes; a strict avoidance of the documentary voice-over; a sense of humor; and a keen eye for all the ways, from the old New York settings to his attraction to religious absolutes, that his story echoes that of his parents. "These past few years I had worked myself into an unhealthy predicament," he explains at one point. "The more vigorously I embraced Judaism, the more vigorously I was inclined to assault Catholicism—and my parents....I could not accept my choice with a full heart unless I rejected theirs with just as much gusto."

So it is. Faithful to his childhood impressions, he gives Catholicism some hard knocks. In a scene set just after his conversion, he compares Judaism's sense of history and tolerance of rebellious human nature with the supposedly Catholic notions that God controls all our actions and we all must strive to be nothing less than perfect. And although he suggests again and again that his mother's Catholicism is extreme, he

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FOREWORD BY WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

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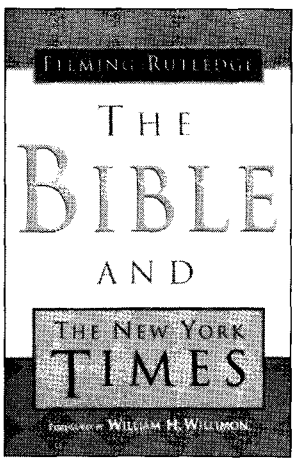

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admits that he never sought a different point of entry into the Catholic tradition, one more tolerant of inquiry and paradox, of human freedom and human frailty.

Near the end of the book he recounts an hour he spent with Cardinal John O'Connor, who had admired his *Times* piece and quoted it from the pulpit on Good Friday. Stephen told the cardinal that his mother was having trouble accepting his decision to be a Jew. In reply the cardinal cited the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about the primacy of an informed conscience, suggesting that "if you will tell your mother that you have tried to study this, that you have prayed about it, this is not just a revolt or a rejection, this is not a dismissal of what you don't understand—that this is where you think God wants you to be, an informed Jew," she would understand.

The doctrine of the primacy of an informed conscience is one of the great doctrinal developments of our time, and many of us could not be Catholics without it. And yet as I read about Stephen's meeting with O'Connor—the climax of the book—I found myself wishing that the cardinal had pressed Stephen harder on the matter of whether and how he had informed his conscience about Catholicism. It isn't that I wish the cardinal had urged Stephen to consider Catholicism one last time. No, it is that the episode made me wonder whether deep down, Catholics, even cardinals, suspect that our faith can't bear the scrutiny of the Stephen Dubners of the world.

Over the last ten years, I watched some of Stephen's story take place—saw him suddenly start dressing like his wife's drama teacher Ivan, "woolen vests over thrift-shop neckties," saw him get an ulcer (just like his father) when he tried to study Latin with Columbia undergraduates at the same time that he was studying acting and Judaism with Ivan. Today, I feel lucky to be able to call him a friend, and I'm not sure which I admire more, his authentic search for God and religion or the wise and moving book he has written about it. It's a book that leaves you with the sense that a life lived religiously is the life most fully lived—that sends you back to your own life, and your own faith, in order to live them more fully. And yet there is something missing in it: there is no scene in which the author encounters the Catholic faith in circumstances apart from his father's death and his mother's piety. There's no exchange with a Catholic counterpart to the friends and teachers who invited him to look into Judaism, if only to deepen his sense of where he has come from and what Catholics and Jews have in common; that's not Stephen's fault, and it's not Cardinal O'Connor's. I wish, as Stephen was in a religious crisis, pinned between Catholicism and Judaism, that I'd been paying closer attention; and I wish that I'd had something to say to hearten him on and wish him God's speed. That's what friends are for, aren't they? □

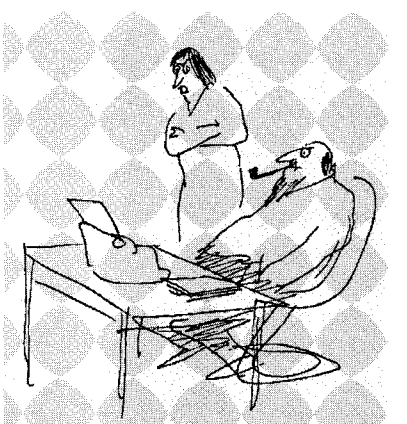
Paul Elie, *editor of* A Tremor of Bliss: Contemporary Writers on the Saints, *is a frequent* Commonweal *contributor.*

ONCE UPON A TIME...

God
Stories
Edited by C. Michael Curtis
Houghton Mifflin, $30, 400 pp.

David J. DeLaura

The blunt title of this collection mirrors the even bolder *God: A Biography*, Jack Miles's 1995 bestseller. C. Michael Curtis, in his thoughtful introduction, speaks of his own religious reawakening in 1977; not surprisingly, a number of the stories gathered here first appeared in the *Atlantic*, where Curtis has been a senior editor for many years. The book conveys, as few theologians and sociologists have done, the emotional texture of some unsettling encounters with God.



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Although some of these stories were written in the past couple of decades, the volume as a whole captures a distinct period, now past, though the spiritual condition it captures is by no means merely historical. Of the twenty-five writers represented here, only three were born after 1945. As a result, these short stories—many written by masters of that subtly suggestive form—will be most engaging for readers old enough, and literate enough, to have had personal experience of that interim culture, when the mainstream Protestant churches remained largely central, unchallenged realities of American life.

These stories, many set in the decades after World War II, and written by and for—and usually about—solidly middle-class North Americans, sometimes present a God of faint presence as well as loving concern. But that mild divinity—when he does put in an appearance—seems close to the gentle Jesus of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Liberal Protestantism. Evangelical preachers, in a number of stories, in effect offer dramatic contrast, one that helps us assess the strengths and weaknesses of educated Christianity. This is the older Evangelicalism of the ill-edu-

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cated in small towns—ranging from the American South to Ontario, Canada, and South Dakota—and before the coming of high-tech televangelism, the suburban New South, and militant fundamentalism as a global political threat. But in any case the religious experience of Evangelicals, here and in the past, has rarely if ever been viewed by serious writers from the inside, and with sympathy.

Catholicism, variously present in at least six stories, is a decidedly indistinct phenomenon. James Joyce's "Grace" is a pleasure to reread, as is J. F. Powers's equally masterful "Zeal"—first published in *Commonweal* in 1956; but Andre Dubus's finely meditative story of a divorced Catholic man coming to terms with loneliness, with the help of a Catholic priest friend, offers only a glancing sense of his specifically Catholic sensibility. The stories of Jewish life and identity by Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and a young Philip Roth make the reader sigh for a now expired age of fiction that explored the serious comedy of ethnic and religious identity in America. The devil has his moments in this very American collection, but plainly we can never again imagine (or perhaps even comprehend) the high baroque drama of flesh and spirit, sin and salvation, that marked the early twentieth-century fictions of Bernanos and Mauriac. In stories by Alice Munro and Joe Ashby Porter, hot-gospelers terrorize and enthrall their followers and others; but there are no calls to extraordinary virtue, or to a Franciscan ecstasy of union and self-emptying, little sense of the awesome older *Mysterium Tremendum* and the *Dies Irae*, and nothing of the more demanding parts of the Sermon on the Mount. Not with a bang....

The best of these stories, with only occasional rumblings of larger cultural shifts, succeed in registering the interior lives of their protagonists. This fact helps the reader see that the widely noted recent lifting of the taboo against religion in the mainstream press is less a sympathetic response to spiritual longings than a recognition of the highly politicized issues that fracture the denominations, long in decline and facing alternative spiritual options, ranging from a revitalized Evangelicalism on the one side to postbiblical self-improvement programs on the other. Paradoxically, the churches—while steadily losing influence in an even more fragmented and individualistic society—find themselves entangled in many more public and divisive arguments (for example, religion in the schools and the public square) simply absent in these period pieces. The book, then, is unintentionally a good index of immense and irreversible recent changes, both in church and society. The scope of this collection is thus defined by its conspicuous absences. Probably the most notable recent dissent in the churches has centered around sexual morality and reproductive biology. But the comedy and anguish of young Catholics regarding birth control, in David Lodge's novels of the 1960s, would be scarcely comprehensible to young Catholics in the 1990s. Of the two most vexed religious/political issues of our day, one—

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abortion—has simply not risen above the horizon here. The other, the morality and social status of homosexuality, is alluded to in four stories; but fascinatingly, only one, the subtle J. F. Powers story, treats it thematically, associating it—in the resonant but strangely distant terms of the older French Catholic novelists—with the mystery of evil.

The literary riches of the book reflect the editor's personal interest in the chemistry between pastor and congregation, or with one or another strain of Christian belief. For example, Richard Bausch beautifully delineates the mutually supportive relationship of a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister—an example of genuine spiritual friendship, a rich and now forgotten phrase and concept. The clergyman in a story by William Hoffman stiffly resists offering the prayer for rain demanded by his congregants, only to yield, finally, to the human instinct "to go to one's Father"—and plead their case before God.

The larger structure of the volume is, in fact, provided by a contest for authenticity between two versions of biblical values. The suburban variety assumes in effect that God is an Englishman, reasonable, reticent—an ethos already deeply mined by lukewarmness and irrelevance. To be sure, a finely wrought story by Peggy Payne presents a well-educated minister, a man of cool reason who sets narrow margins for himself, who is deeply shaken by hearing the voice of God utter reassuring phrases—and who finally submits to a wave of love. (His congregation remains largely uncomprehending.) Still, the editor, most of these writers, and the putative reader are implicitly drawn to a God who is not in wind, or earthquake, or fire—but after the fire, a still small voice (1 Kings 19.11).

The other God is the Old Testament and Calvinist figure—patriarchal, intrusive, the stern God of Judgment: The law is the law, says a character in the Malamud story. But in no story here—not even in Eileen Pollack's splendid the "Rabbi in the Attic"—is that ancient and distant figure given the final word. For me the most compelling theme throughout is that of the fate of women in religious circumstances, and before latter-day feminism could inflect their lives and self-understanding.

Girls and women are sometimes bullied into submission, and even sexually abused, by charismatic male preacher figures—for example, in unsettling narratives by Joe Ashby Porter and Louise Erdrich. A young girl in the South, in a sketch by Elizabeth Spencer, relishes the small taste of freedom that will allow her later to break from her parents' literalistic religion altogether. A typically confused and adrift heroine of Bobbie Ann Mason's struggles ineffectually against her mismatched marriage to a narrow-minded preacher and against other complacent church women, and ends in blank and chilling surrender to her duty. The protagonist in a story by Mary Ward Brown does successfully defy the manipulative assault of an Evangelical preacher (a blond Jesus, with the eyes of a true believer

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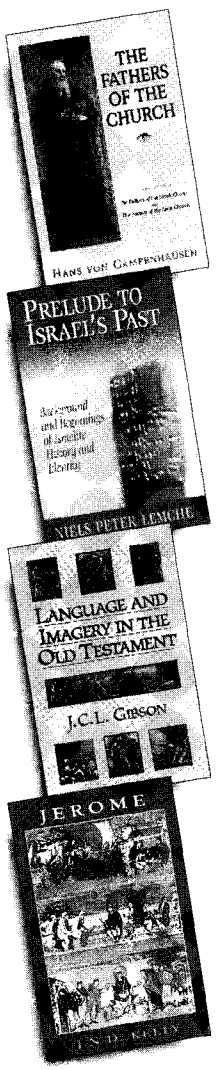

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blessed or cursed with certainty) and his congregation—and experiences her own silent, private spiritual recovery. But a surprising number of these women remain alienated and haunting figures, lost in this twilight period.

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David DeLaura *is professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania.*

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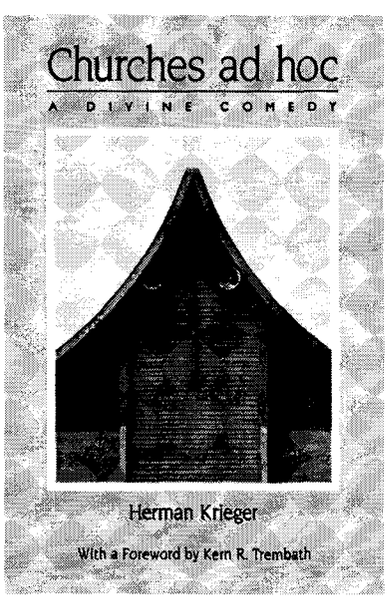

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IN THE TRENCHES

Things Seen and Unseen
A Year Lived in Faith
Nora Gallagher
Alfred A. Knopf, $23, 241 pp.

Peggy Rosenthal

This is an inspired book. Nora Gallagher, a writer for *Life*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Mother Jones*, has transformed her professional skills into a vehicle for at once probing and dramatizing what it means to live as a committed Christian in our time.

How she returned to Christian faith, after trying to make sense of life in the secular world, forms part of the narrative. But Gallagher concentrates on sketching the incidents through which she and her fellow parishioners at Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California, seek to live out their Christian commitment. Here is where Gallagher's professional writing experience serves her well. Magazine journalism usually presents issues by profiling real people. Gallagher turns that technique into a resource for representing the Incarnation, which is for her the power of God's love embodied in each of us as we stumble through a day. Furthermore, the mosaic journalistic narrative—quick, usually unexplained shifts between short scenes—plays well into Gallagher's sense that the apparently fragmented experiences of daily life are connected by unseen forces in ways we only occasionally make out. She isn't at all claiming this as an original insight. Quite the contrary. The book's value is that it brings to life a current self-understanding of mainstream Christian spirituality: that, as Gallagher quotes from Esther de Waal, religious practice means "allowing the extraordinary to break in on the ordinary." *Things Seen and Unseen* is, in the best sense, a product of its time.

The year of the book's subtitle isn't a calendar year, but the liturgical year, whose seasons Gallagher takes as her chapter titles. Though each chapter touches on how a liturgical church formally celebrates the season at hand, for Gallagher each season's real action lies in the concrete ways that her parish lives it out. As grounding for this understanding of liturgy, which is also that of current liturgical theology, she cites Saint John Chrysostom's insistence that "there is a liturgy after the liturgy, that work in the world is inseparable from worship."

So while Gallagher includes some powerful descriptions of traditional liturgies, the book's main settings are the parish soup kitchen and the weekly meetings of her "base community" (we Catholics might call it her small Christian community), where members both reflect on and experience each season's particular spirit. Journalism's free-floating present tense ("Yolanda comes into the kitchen carrying a letter") allows Gallagher to recount incidents that perhaps didn't occur literally during that liturgical season but which in their essence are very much *of* that season. So, for instance, in Advent, the season when "the holy breaks into the daily," she looks up from the salad plates she is filling in the soup kitchen's dining room and is struck by an invisible light connecting a homeless man sitting at a table and the parish volunteer who is bringing him his meal. In Eastertide, the parish seeks signs of hope in the painful deaths of members and relatives, whose sufferings—including those of Gallagher's brother, dying of cancer—are woven through the book. In Lent, the brokenness of human relations is the implicit theme. Some kitchen guests behave badly; neighborhood businesses complain; we learn of the priest's struggles in coming to terms with his homosexuality.

That Gallagher's pastor can struggle so publicly and remain the community's priest shows where this parish stands on the hot-button issues of our day. Gallagher makes clear that she wouldn't be at Trinity Episcopal if it weren't decidedly liberal. The parish's open discussions of sexuality and its creative forms of worship may make even mainstream "liberal" Christians uncomfortable. But because Gallagher presents these practices as developing from a search for how to live Christianity authentically, they challenge us all to ask how deeply and broadly our own parish is living out the faith, and how powerfully liturgical symbols are speaking to and through us.

Gallagher has the gift of writing for a range of audiences. Assuming a readership wholly ignorant of Christian practice, she explains the basics as she goes along. However, this rudimentary instruction is done with a flair that practiced Christians will find refreshing. On Pentecost, for instance, after explicating the key passage in Acts, she glosses: "The third member of the Trinity arrives without warning and, unlike the youthful, dramatic son, moves in to stay." Most important, the principal subject of the book—the ups and downs of a community trying to embody their faith—can engage readers with no religion or a great deal of religion. For Roman Catholics, there's the added interest of seeing what it's like to benefit from the service of ordained women.

I'm going to recommend this book to my parish liturgy committee and to the volunteers in our neighborhood outreach supper program; to the coordinator of "small Christian communities" in my diocese; to a Baptist friend who is curious about the experience of the liturgical year; to a relative who grew up in a non-practicing Jewish household and is now being mysteriously drawn toward the Episcopal church his wife attends; to a Buddhist friend, an anthropologist, who in her comparative religion courses wants her students to get a feel for the lived texture of religious practice; to any of the many nonbelieving friends who, apparently out of nowhere at dinner parties, ask my husband and me what our faith means to us. And I recommend it to people one hundred or five hundred years from now who want a firsthand account of day-to-day Christianity at the end of the notoriously secular twentieth century. □

Peggy Rosenthal *has, most recently, co-edited the anthology* Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry *(Oxford University Press).*

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Love Undetectable
Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival
Andrew Sullivan
Alfred A. Knopf, $23, 255 pp.

Gilbert Meilaender

In his preface, former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan says that he had intended to write a book about friendship. Distracted from that task by the death (from AIDS) of a close friend, he turned instead to write the essay "When Plagues End." Returning to the subject of friendship (in the essay in this volume titled "If Love Were All"), he decided that both of these essays were "different answers to the same questions, different responses to the same period in my life, different parts, I hope, of the same book." The third essay in this book, "Virtually Abnormal," is a sustained examination of psychological debates about the origins of homosexuality.

I confess that I cannot find many connections among the essays, other than that all three take up questions important to the author's own sense of himself. Unless we are especially interested in that, however, we are probably better off simply taking the essays as three quite separate pieces. Indeed, the one that makes the fewest references to Sullivan's own life and identity—"Virtually Abnormal"—is surely the most tightly argued of the three. It examines Freud's views on the origins of homosexuality and turns, then, to more recent theorists—both reparative theorists and defenders of the "normality" of homosexuality.

What is never quite clear, even at the end of the essay, is what readers—or the author himself—should conclude from the evidence he discusses and the arguments he dissects. He summarizes the long course of the argument in this way: "Homosexuality is not, in the usual sense of the word, normal. But nor is it, from a psychoanalytic context, necessarily abnormal. It is different." None of this, however, gets us to a moral judgment—as Sullivan himself realizes in his clearer moments. He does, though, outline the two most important moral issues to be considered when evaluating homosexual relationships: the lack of "an intrinsic ability to create new life within that relationship," and the lack of "true gender complementarity" or otherness in such a bond.

These features suggest to Sullivan that narcissism and promiscuity are likely to be permanent features of gay culture, and in this book, despite his status as a strong proponent of "gay marriage" (*see* Sullivan's *Virtually Normal*), he seems strangely at ease with that conclusion. At some points, indeed, he attempts to make a virtue of these limitations. Thus, for example, he argues that "precisely because such a same-sex relationship cannot in itself create new life, it is more pellucidly entered into for its own sake." One wonders whether this is really a good thing, a question to which I return below.

"When Plagues End" is in part the story of the death of a friend, and in part reflection upon the significance—psychological and otherwise—of the fact that it is now reasonable to think of "surviving" AIDS. Sullivan explicitly recognizes that AIDS has not really been a plague in the normal sense; yet his discussion does not seem to assimilate that acknowledgment. This essay also contains the book's most sustained analysis of and response to the fact that Sullivan's own faith community—Roman Catholicism—condemns homosexual conduct. His response, at least in my view, is one of the most disappointingly weak elements of the book. Having acknowledged that his own HIV

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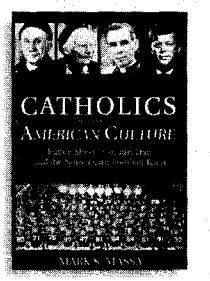

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infection might have come from any one of many sexual partners, having argued that "gay marriage" would be a better way of channeling desire, he can still defend his refusal to give up promiscuous activity as "an act, at some level, of integrity. It was simply not possible for me to change my entire makeup...."

Hence, a religious ethic that calls for abstinence outside marriage requires "the arid emptiness of complete self-denial, which is to say, to end one's life altogether." Evidently Sullivan must think that this is also what the church has asked of unmarried heterosexuals—not faithful obedience to the ordinance of God, but a loss of integrity and end to meaningful life. Thus, he can describe his own view, which holds that sex is most humane when expressed in faithful love but also permissible in other contexts as a more "nuanced" and less simplistic ethic than that which the church has taught—a claim that sounds more condescending than persuasive.

"If Love Were All" is the essay that would have become a larger book about friendship according to Sullivan's original design. It discusses, in varying degrees of detail, many of the important writings on friendship; yet, many of the judgments Sullivan offers about this diffuse body of writing seem to me either imprecise or just mistaken. Thus, for example, he describes Montaigne's famous essay as the "first and last serious treatment" of friendship in the modern world. He is right, of course, to make the general point that friendship received more attention in the classical world, but that judgment overlooks writers as diverse as Jeremy Taylor, Emerson, Simone Weil, and C.S. Lewis. Taylor's *A Discourse...of Friendship* is at least as serious a treatment as Montaigne's—and far more carefully argued. Having described Montaigne's as the "deepest" essay on friendship, he later distinguishes (romantic) love from friendship by suggesting that "love is sudden, [but] friendship is steady." We fall in love, but not into friendship. Yet, of course, all readers of Montaigne's essay know that he says of his friendship with Etienne that "at our first meeting...we found ourselves so taken with each other...that from that time on nothing was so close to us as each other." Sullivan also suggests that friendship, again in contrast to love, permits "a space that allowed the other person to remain safely another person." Montaigne, by contrast, writes that "in the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again." Now, of course, on any or all of these matters Sullivan's views may be correct, but they do not, without considerably more argument, flow very naturally out of Montaigne's essay.

Sullivan seems to regard it as one of the strengths of Aristotle's view that "friendship is impossible without self-love." But it may be more reasonable to see in this—if it really is Aristotle's view—the chief problem his thought on friendship never overcomes. Moreover, the classical notion of the friend as "another self" may, in fact, cut against Sullivan's claim that one must first love one-

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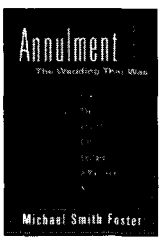

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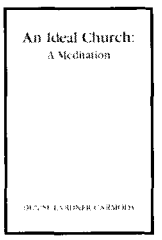

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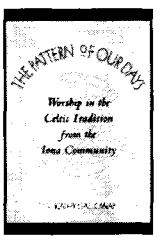

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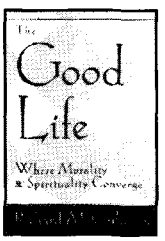

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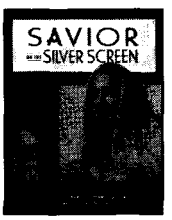

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self in order to be capable of friendship. We need the friend as "another self" so that we may come to know who we really are. Hence, an attempt first to know or love oneself, to suppose that I must first be a person capable of friendship, may be self-defeating. Something must first be risked in friendship if we are ever really to become "selves" capable of sustaining deep personal bonds.

Something must first be risked in friendship if we are ever really to become "selves" capable of sustaining deep personal bonds.

Sullivan's high regard for Montaigne's essay is grounded chiefly, I think, in the fact that Montaigne so clearly exalts friendship above familial and romantic love. Romantic and sexual love are inferior to the union of souls in friendship because "bodies cannot, strictly speaking, unite." I do not know what "strictly speaking" means here. We need an argument to show how souls, "strictly speaking," can unite. But some bodies do seem more suited to unite than others, and Sullivan's claim simply overlooks that fact. He dislikes the neediness implied in the surrender of self that romantic love involves (though, as I noted above, he may be mistaken to suppose that friendship does not also call for such self-surrender). He dislikes the neediness of loves grounded in biological urges or necessities—in our embodied condition. That this embodied condition might lead us to marry, at least in part, for the sake of children, is to him a sign of deficiency in sexual and familial love. Like Montaigne, he believes that familial love is inferior to friendship because it is unchosen.

One might usefully contrast Sullivan's treatment of friendship with that of Lewis in *The Four Loves*. For Lewis each of the natural loves provides an image of something that must be present in *caritas*, in love that is everything it should be. And each of the natural loves, isolated from *caritas*, must go wrong and fall short. By contrast, Sullivan simply pits the various natural loves against each other, giving first prize to friendship, and he thereby misses important aspects of human love at its best. In short, readers in search of a nuanced mode of entry into the literature of friendship should not regard this essay as an entirely reliable guide, though they may find other reasons to read one or more of the essays in this book. □

Gilbert Meilaender *holds the Board of Directors Chair in Theological Ethics at Valparaiso University. He is the author of* Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics *(University of Notre Dame), among other books.*

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GOD'S QUARRY

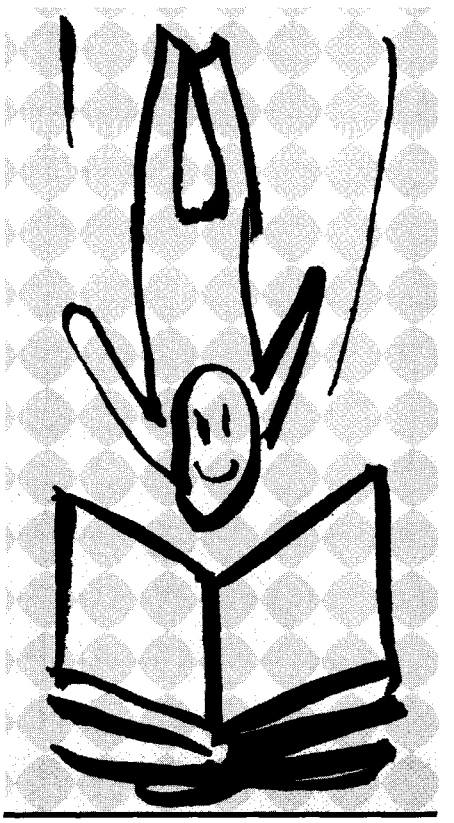
The Seven Storey Mountain
Fiftieth Anniversary Edition
Thomas Merton
Harcourt, Brace & Company, $35, 467 pp.

Best Spiritual Writing 1998
Edited by Philp Zaleski
HarperSanFrancisco, $15, 352 pp.

Michael O. Garvey

It's a safe bet that Thomas Merton will never be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church, but for many of her children, and certainly for me, he will always be at least one of our very best chiropractors. Monsignor William Shannon's solicitous introduction to the splendid fiftieth anniversary edition of Merton's autobiography carries some anxious admonitions about how the occasionally triumphalistic tone of the prose and the somewhat less than fully ecumenical outlook might perplex us sophisticated children of Vatican II. True, true, and *Huckleberry Finn* has racial slurs, and Mississippi Fred McDowell's lyrics are sexist, and *Macbeth* is violent. What Merton called "dry, outlandish technical compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use" do occasionally creep into this narrative, and from time to time he seems to be as tolerant of silly ultramontane rectitude as he will later be of silly theological extravagance. So what? This is a great adventure story, a book that comes roaring at you and beating its chest. Much like its author, it will always slightly offend, it will always resist sprucing up, and it will never be made entirely respectable. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a treasure of the church.

Merton's barnacled and unwieldy classic is familiar to most *Commonweal* readers, and the particulars of his tumultuous journey from a faded medieval southern France through a moribund prewar England to an edgy prewar New York and finally to the high ground of Gethsemani need not be recounted here. It is an ancient story, the *only* Christian story, really, about the relentlessness of the Father of Jesus and the inescapability of his love: A young man is mesmerized by his own power and intoxicated by pure possibility, and he attempts to possess himself and his universe. Living solely for the satisfaction of his own appetites, he gradually becomes their slave, and he encounters disaster after disaster, and tries anesthetic after anesthetic. He despairs of himself, finally, and then God rescues him. Anyone who spends any time around Jesus knows, and on some level lives the same story, but Merton transformed the tale of the prodigal son into a literary thriller—jazzed up, powerfully narrated, and as impossible to put down now as it must have been a half century ago.



However much Merton may have grown as a monk and a man in the years between the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his death in Bangkok, I don't think he grew much as a writer at all. Which is to say that this, the book that launched his paradoxical career as a celebrity of self-abandonment, is every bit as absorbing a read as *Seeds of Contemplation, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* or the *Asian Journals*. The whole bagful of contradictions is on display right from the beginning. Everything that will delight and exasperate Merton readers for the rest of the century is here: the searing self-scrutiny, the occasionally apodictic tone, the wisecracking, the vaulting lyricism, the piercing remembrance, the self-deprecation, and the showing off. He thinks nothing of hopping on top of his narrative for some absolutely corny exclamation like "France, I am glad I was born in your land!" or ""Oakham! Oakham!" (addressing that awful English boarding school in which he underwent too much of his adolescence) or "New York, you are mine! I love you!" But only a very brave writer, only a writer's writer, can write so badly, and precisely such excess and audacity give rise to some wonderful passages, too, like this one about one of many illusory fresh starts before his conversion:

> October is a fine and dangerous season in America. It is dry and cool and the land is wild with red and gold and crimson, and all the lassitudes of August have seeped out of your blood, and you are full of ambition. It is a wonderful time to begin anything at all. You go to college and every course in the catalogue looks wonderful. The names of the subjects seem to lay open the way to a new world. Your arms are full of new, clean notebooks, waiting to be filled. You pass through the doors of the library and the smell of thousands of well-kept books makes your head swim with a clean and subtle pleasure. You have a new hat,

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a new sweater, perhaps, or a whole new suit. Even the nickels and the quarters in your pocket feel new, and the buildings shine in the glorious sun.

I will always love Merton for remembering those notebooks, that sweater, those nickels and quarters. Annie Dillard, another writer's writer, insists that to write well is to "spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now." That impetuosity guarantees a sort of gallantry to Merton's prose, transforming its flaws into something like wounds received in honorable combat.

Nevertheless, if the appeal of *The Seven Storey Mountain* were merely literary, it would be more a curiosity than a classic. It is, first and foremost, an absolutely sincere account of a man overwhelmed by grace, and its freshness after fifty years might say more about Our Lord than about Merton. There are, after all, contributors to Philip Zaleski's collection whose prose is every bit as good as, and, in some cases, better than Merton's. Come to think of it, nothing by Annie Dillard is among these pieces of the best spiritual writing of 1998. She must have been idle last year.

It's said that the theologian who first distinguished between mortal and venial sin is probably in hell. I sometimes hope that infernal space has also been reserved for the scholar who first isolated and sought to define "spirituality." That's probably too harsh, but "spirituality," like "spiritual writing" is, at best, moderately useful as a category. In Zaleski's anthology, for example, great spiritual writing is "prose or poetry that addresses, in a matter both profound and beautiful, the workings of the spirit." This reminds me of a wonderful bumper sticker I saw the other day which read, "I like cool stuff."

Now there's certainly nothing wrong with cool stuff, and Zaleski's collection has plenty of it. But mountain climbing with Thomas Merton can make a reader impatient with even the most picturesque hills. Remembering a miserable time shortly after his conversion, Merton quotes God's admonition to the Israelites, "For the Land which thou goest to possess is not like the land of Egypt," and observes that he had "made the terrible mistake of entering the Christian life as if it were merely the natural life invested with a kind of supernatural mode by grace." He gradually—and fearfully—learned that God was terribly more than some mere guarantor of meaning.

Some of the very gifted writers Zaleski presents seem to approach "the workings of the spirit" with a similar naiveté, and produce something more like *belles lettres* than "spiritual writing." A gaseous essay by Thomas Moore, for instance, launches a sort of relativistic balloon flight from Botticelli's *Primavera*, through some cloudy ruminations on the cleavage between the natural and spiritual worlds, and pretty memories of an Irish coast and reflections on the monks who lived there long ago before landing the reader ever so softly on a suggestion that we ought to appreciate nature. Another, by Joseph Epstein, leads an edifyingly erudite pirouette before concluding that it's gosh darn hard to know just what the "the good life" means.

But there are some fine pieces here, too. In "God's Love on a Darkling Plain," Barry Lopez brings together a stark depiction of a tundra landscape with a painful meditation on Original Sin. Rabbi Marc Gellman's splendid sermon, "What Are You Looking For?" is the first truly unsentimental consideration of angels to appear for a long time. And a week-long retreat could be based on "Love in the Morning," Andre Dubus's deceptively quotidian description of weekday Mass.

What the best of these writers have in common with Merton is an awareness of their paradoxical plight. Their work as writers requires boldness in the face of a blank page, but they are hunting God, and hunters are God's quarry. No wonder they're all a little nutty. God bless them. □

Michael O. Garvey *is the author of* Finding Fault *(Thomas More Press).*

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MY FRIEND'S KILLER

Mark Redmond

I am away on vacation in upstate New York. I decide I should visit an old acquaintance, because he is so nearby. I didn't pick the Finger Lake region as my vacation spot for this reason. It just works out that way. It is only when I get upstate that I have this vague feeling that the prison where Santos is doing time is somewhere close.

And it is. I take out my address book and discover that Santos is incarcerated in a minimum-security facility in a town I've actually been to. It is, in fact, the same town where I take my son for ice cream each night. Dairy Queen and the Cayuga Correctional Facility. Quite a combination.

I haven't seen Santos in nine years. That was when I visited him at Rikers Island, the first jail those arrested in New York City are likely to face, particularly if awaiting trial. Santos had been arrested for murder, the murder of one of my co-workers. She was a nun, in her late sixties, who volunteered at a shelter for homeless teen-agers in the South Bronx. I was the program director. I knew her well.

Santos, at that time, was a nineteen-year-old crack addict. But I can tell you with all sincerity that he was not a bad kid. When he wasn't doing drugs he was an absolute gentleman. I never heard him speak disrespectfully to our staff. He got up on time, he made his bed, he did all the right things. But he was hooked on crack. It was obvious to us, and we pleaded with him to get help, but he refused. We finally had to ask him to leave. The next evening he returned to the house, the sister was murdered, a search for Santos ensued, and he was eventually convicted and sentenced to twenty-five years. I asked him in Rikers if he did it. He told me he was so high that night he honestly could not remember what he did or didn't do. I believed him. Once he was convicted, he was shipped upstate. I began writing to him and a correspondence developed. I never again asked him about the crime. He never brought it up either.

So I decide to visit him. Why? Certainly Jesus' statement, "And when I was in prison you visited me," comes to mind, but so does a scene from Oscar Hijuelos's novel, *Mr. Ives' Christmas*. In the novel, Mr. Ives visits the man who mindlessly murdered his son some twenty years earlier. He does not do so to accuse the man or unleash upon him the agony he has felt because of the loss of his son. It is an effort at reconciliation. By this act Mr. Ives achieves a kind of peace.

I sign in at the prison entrance, emptying all my pockets and going through the jail-house rituals I know so well, having worked with troubled kids for seventeen years. I wait while they summon Santos. When he arrives he is surprised to see me. He tells me I am the first person to visit him since he left Rikers. His family is in Puerto Rico. There are a few relatives living in New York City, but none has come to see him. I am, of course, surprised by how much older he looks. He's no longer a teen-ager. He's almost thirty, an adult. And he is going prematurely bald. Genetics, or a result of ten years of prison life?

I'm not sure what to talk about, and neither is he. I bring up the names of the various staff members from the shelter. We trade stories about them and about the kids who were there. Most of the stories are funny, and I discover Santos hasn't lost his sense of humor. He then brings up the issue of parole. His first chance at parole will be in the year 2003, and he talks about 2003 the way you and I talk about April when it's March. I wonder how someone can hold onto hope for that long, especially knowing it is a dim hope. Chances are a person convicted of killing a nun will not be paroled at the first opportunity. So how does Santos get up each day and go about his prison life? What motivates him? What keeps him from plunging into a deep, dark depression? I'm tempted to ask, but I don't. He is functioning in that prison, and I don't want to set off the mental dominoes that will take him off that course.

The corrections officer in charge of the visiting area tells us our hour is up. I'm half-relieved. My ten-year-old son is waiting for me back at our cabin, probably eager to go fishing. I have felt awkward seeing Santos. Correspondence is easier than being face to face. We hug each other good-bye, and I encourage him to hang in there.

Afterwards, I am glad I went. It was something I wanted to do and in some ways needed to do. A little like Mr. Ives, I guess. And I am certain that if she were alive, my murdered friend and colleague would have done the same. □

Mark Redmond *is associate director of the Domus Foundation, a residence for homeless teen-agers in Stamford, Connecticut.*

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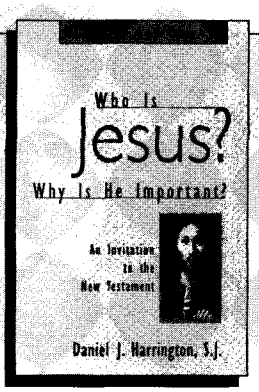

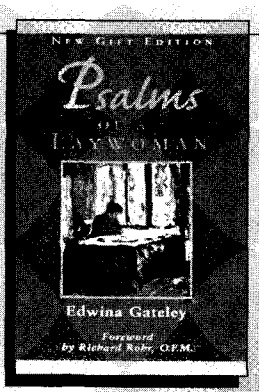

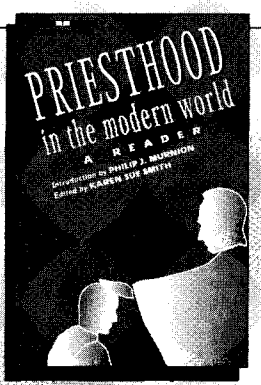

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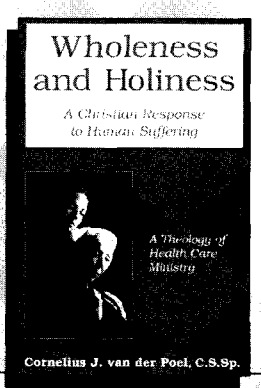
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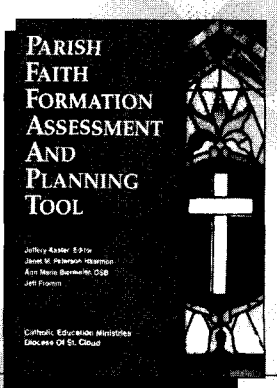

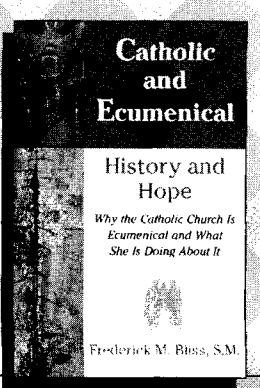
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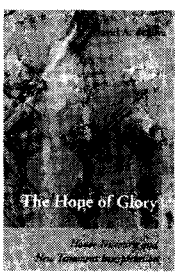

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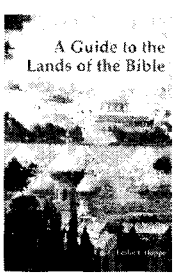

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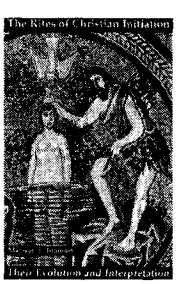

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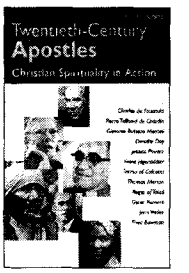

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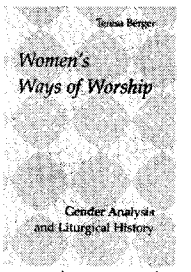

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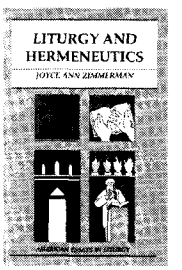

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